

Harry Potter and the Heir of Slytherin

by The Engulfing Silence

One year ends and another begins. During this year, Harry Potter studies under Nicolas Flamel, is forced to deal with a Vampire Princess, and learns there is yet another danger lurking within the walls of Hogwarts, one that's been around since the time of the Founders. What's a poor student with perfect memory to do? Sequel to Gift of Memories. Warning: Character Death!

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Days of Summer

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Book II

Harry Potter and the Heir of Slytherin

Chapter 1: Days of Summer

It was night time. The sun had long since lowered beyond the horizon and the moon was out. Millions of stars twinkled in the velvety night sky, sparkling and glittering like a sea of diamonds. It was a gorgeous scene, a view that many artists had tried to capture for years without success, and one that Harry Potter had seen many many times. Enough times that his memory had managed to pick out all of the constellations with nothing but a glance and could predict each star cycle for the next two years.

Of course, even he had never seen the stars quite like this. Sitting back on his hind legs, his midnight black fur ruffling in the stiff breeze that blew through the clearing in the cope of trees he had taken to hiding himself in, Harry Potter stared up at the night sky through the canopy of trees with glowing green eyes.

Suddenly, without warning, the young man turned jaguar took off like a shot. To any human it would seem as if his body had turned into a blur as he ran through the trees, deftly avoiding every object within his path with great ease.

He moved quickly, his four pawed legs propelling him forward at increasingly greater and greater speeds as he pushed himself far harder than he could as a human. Harry didn't know quite how fast he was going, but he had to be at least moving somewhere around forty, maybe fifty kilometers an hour.

It might not be as fast as his Nimbus 2000, but damn if it wasn't just as

exhilarating.

There were many things Harry noticed about this particular animagus form that he took careful note of during this first test run of his newly acquired ability. His body, which had always been quite strong as a human, was nearly ten times more powerful in this animal form. He could feel his leg muscles as they worked on providing him with the propulsion to move forward. They were not even straining despite the incredible speed he was running at. His balance and reaction time was beyond top notch. He could react to anything at a moments notice, jumping over fallen logs, climbing onto trees and tree branches so he could move along the trees themselves without the slightest bit of effort. His sense of smell had been enhanced to the point that he could pick out all of the individual scents in the area and discern the direction they were coming from with ease.

Better still, Harry's vision was sharper than it had ever been. Even in the darkness of the night, surrounded by enough trees that only a modicum of the light from the moon and stars could reach him, Harry could see with perfect clarity of vision. Not even the fast pace he had set as he sped through the small obstacle course of trees changed his perception. There wasn't even any blurring that usually came from moving so fast.

Harry suspected that these intense increases of perception were not just due to his new form, but magical in nature. Magical beyond the fact that he was a wizard turned jaguar. While it was impossible to know just how powerful the senses of a jaguar were since there was no way to communicate with them, Harry did not believe that the species had senses that were *this* powerful.

Of course, now that he could transform into a jaguar at will, maybe he would be able to speak with jaguars. If anything such a conversation should prove to be interesting.

He did notice a few downsides. His mind, while still very much his own, was a little more animalistic than it was in his human form. It took a good deal more effort than normal to think in a logical manner. The problem was his instincts as a Jaguar were running interference with his much more logically thinking human brain. It created a bit of a problem at first,

but Harry had learned that once he let go of his need to study everything about his animagus form, his ability to think became a bit more clear.

Harry stayed outside for several hours, testing his new found animagus form and relishing in the sense of freedom it gave him. There was something to be said about being able to turn into one of the most powerful and fastest felines in the animal kingdom. It was truly one of the most incredible thrilling experiences he'd had so far in his almost twelve years of life.

It wasn't until it was nearly one o'clock in the morning that Harry finally decided to call it quits. Calming his more animalistic instincts, the young Potter heir began to focus, willing his body to change back into his human one.

The event didn't happen slowly, but rather, all at once. His body rippled and morphed, shifting from his Jaguar form to his human one. His long torso became more compact, his legs elongated and his feet changed from paws into normal human feet. His arms and hands experienced much the same, morphing from their four digit paws to five digit hands and his arms into a pair of muscular human arms. The tail sticking out from between his hind legs shrank and moved back into his tail bone. The muzzle on his face became less and less pronounced, becoming more human in less than a second, and the thick, shiny black fur that covered his body disappeared and became a pair of black jeans and a dark green shirt. The transformation was complete.

Harry Potter stood there for a moment, looking over his body, checking to make sure nothing was out of place. He didn't want to head home only to discover he still had animal ears or a tail. That would just be embarrassing, and would probably cause the Dursley's to freak out.

Or pass out, which might actually be kind of funny.

Ugh, he had been hanging out with Weasley twins too much if he was thinking about playing a prank.

When everything checked out, the young man disappeared with nothing more than a whisper.

He reappeared inside of his room, which looked the same as ever. The only difference being that his normally impeccably clean desk was littered with books, arcane looking tomes filled with ancient knowledge. Some were open to a specific page, others were closed and awaiting their turn to be of some use to him. A few had book marks so he didn't have to flip through the pages to get to the one he had been reading. All of them were of the same subject.

Divesting himself of all his clothing except for his briefs, Harry sent a modicum of magic and intent towards his clothing, surrounding it. He then created a small path with his magic for his clothes to travel. The jeans, socks, and shirt all floated into the air and traveled along the set path he had given them until they were hovering over the small dirty hampers bin, which they soon dropped into when he released his magic. Meanwhile, Harry himself walked over to his bed and moved under the covers, falling asleep instantly, his exhaustion making him too tired to meditate.

That night he dreamed of his parents death mixed in with his confrontation with Voldemort the previous year when he was told by the man that they were very similar. Needless to say, he had a very troubled sleep.

XoX

It was early in the morning when Harry found himself entering the building where Master Wei taught his martial arts. Because it was so early, there were not that many people there. In fact, aside from Master Wei himself, who Harry was almost positive lived there, there was only one other person within the building.

Said person was a female who was maybe just a little less than a decade older than Harry. She had long blond hair that was currently tied into a tight pony tail on top of her head with only a few strands that were falling loose to frame a lovely face and a pair of piercing blue eyes that were currently set in a mask of concentration as she went through the motions for her unique form of combat.

Currently, the woman of nineteen was wearing a red kung fu uniform with a black sash around her waist. It was very different than the standard

Karate uniform that Harry preferred. Rather than being an open jacket that tied on the left side of the waist, the kung fu uniform was a long sleeved jacket that had five black frog buttons that ran down the middle to close it and a slightly raised collar as opposed to the very open collar that plunged into a V due to how the karate uniforms tied closed. The pants were very similar his own, except hers had an elastic at the ankles as well as an elastic draw string at the waist.

Harry allowed himself a moment or two to watch the girl as she went through her forms. She was very graceful, incredibly so. She was also very fast. Her fists seemed to blur as she threw them forward in a combination of short, straight jabs and flowing corkscrews. He could see that her attacks were designed to hit the weakest parts of the human body; the eyes, the ears, the joints of the jaw, the larynx, elbows, wrists, the solar plexus, the accumulation of nerves just below the upper four abdominal muscles. He even saw her giving a particularly brutal kick towards the area that would be the genitals on a male of average height.

He recognized the form she used. How could he not when he had been subject to the style so many times in the past. The use of hitting the weak points on the human body was a Krav Maga concept, which Harry actually used in his own form of martial arts when going on the offensive.

The other forms he recognized as a combination of taekwondo, a style of fighting that emphasized kicking, and a Southern style of kung fu called *Bak Mei* (Literal translation meaning White Eyebrows), whose creator was said to have been one of the legendary five elders who, according to some accounts, betrayed Shaolin to the Chinese imperial government in seventeen twenty-seven.

It was a highly unusual combination of styles to utilize. Taekwondo and Bak Mei were two very different styles of fighting. One would think that combining the two would create an awkward form with a number of wholes and pauses between forms that someone would be able to exploit.

That was not the case here. The woman's movements were not only precise and smooth, but also flowed into each other perfectly. It was an amazing sight to see, and showed how much dedication the woman had

put into her martial arts to be capable of combining two very different styles along with the basic concepts of a third style into something beautiful.

Harry waited patiently until the woman was done practicing before stepping further into the room, alerting the two to his presence.

"Harry," Master Wei greeted as the woman with them turned around to look at Harry, a smile lighting her features when she saw him. "You're just in time for a spar. I am sure you remember Katrina?"

"Of course," Harry replied as he greeted the only female of the group cordially. "It's a pleasure to see you again, Katrina. I heard you finished third place in the national mixed martial arts tournament. Congratulations."

"Harry," Katrina replied with a grin. Her voice did not have an English accent at all, not surprising, considering she was not a native. "Yeah, I kicked total ass. Showed those jerks that a woman can do anything a man can do, only better."

Katrina Whethers was an American woman who had moved to Britain with her parents when she was twelve. The young woman was very bright, with a level of intelligence that almost matched Harry's own. She also had what many people in England called 'the American Cowboy' personality. Or perhaps cowgirl would be more accurate term considering her gender.

Harry did not know much about her past, but he did know that she had been practicing martial arts long before she moved to Britain. By the time Harry had joined, Katrina, who had been twelve at the time, already had several medals from various tournaments under her belt, though none of them had been first place. She had also been one of the key figures who had helped develop his fighting style.

She had also been one of two people who had given him enough bruises to last a lifetime.

The other person was Master Wei.

He did not necessarily consider her a friend, but she was also a bit more than an acquaintance. He had a healthy dose of respect for her strength and ability in martial arts as well as her intelligence. Aside from being a top ranking martial artist, she also had a full-time scholarship at Oxford. Last time she had been in Surrey, she had mentioned she was studying Health and Life Sciences in order to fulfill her life goal of researching and coming up with a more humane and efficient way of dealing with cancer that did not involve radiation therapy or drugs. A worthy goal, and one Harry could not help but admire.

"It's good to see you're doing well. I heard from the old coot here that you've gone off to some boarding school."

Said 'old coot' grunted at the disrespectful term Katrina used for him, but did not actually say anything. The words were merely a term of endearment and not actually meant to be disrespectful, even if Master Wei was not necessarily pleased at being called old.

"So," Katrina's grin widened as she looked at Harry with an excited gaze. "Are you up for a spar? I've been looking forward to seeing how much you've improved since the last time I was here."

"With you? I am always up for the chance to test myself against a martial artist of your caliber," Harry couldn't help the excitement building up inside of him at the thought of sparring Katrina. While sparring Master Wei was nice and definitely helped him improve every time he came in, getting his ass beaten by an old man tended to leave a bad taste in his mouth.

Not that getting beaten by a woman just seven years his senior was any better, but then, Harry just disliked losing no matter who he sparred against.

"Still a smooth talker, eh Harry?" Katrina chuckled as her soon to be sparring partner tilted his head and looked at her in mild curiosity. Eventually, he shrugged the girl's words off. She had been saying things like that ever since Harry had memorized the dictionary and started using at least two of the words he learned every time he spoke.

Even after all this time, he still didn't know what she meant. He also didn't

care enough to find out.

"Just let me change into my uniform," Harry said before Katrina could say anything else. He didn't want her to begin trying to embarrass him like she was sometimes wont to do.

Harry made his way into the changing room where he quickly and efficiently changed from his normal clothes to his uniform. It probably would have been more efficient to just change at home before arriving, but Harry always felt it would be awkward to walk down the street in his karate uniform.

When he was finished changing, he came back outside and did a few warm up stretches while Katrina jumped up and down on her toes to keep herself warmed up. Master Wei moved to the center of the sparring circle on the large blue mat, waiting for the other two to get into position before allowing them to start.

Ready, and, fight!"

Without warning, Katrina sped towards him the moment the spar started, unleashing a swift high kick that was aimed at his jaw.

Rather than back pedal, as most sane people would do, Harry moved forward, using his forearm to block and redirect the kick over his head. His reason for doing this was because moving backwards not only allowed the one attacking to set the pace and move after him, but also because there was a higher risk of getting hit by a follow up attack involved. By moving towards Katrina, he managed to position himself at a range that was too close for her powerful legs to actually do any damage from and left him in the position to counter attack.

After directing her leg over his head and towards his left side, Harry made an attempt at striking her with his padded fist in the larynx. If the spar he found himself were a real life situation, he would have used a knife edge strike or hit her with the knuckles of his middle and ring finger, but that could have crushed her wind pipe if it hit.

Not to say that it did hit. Katrina was quick to slap his hand away with an open palm before it could get close to hitting her. That still did not stop

Harry, who took another step into her guard and used the elbow from the same arm he attempted to hit her throat with to hit her nose.

Katrina leaned backwards, lifting her leg up at the same time and launching a powerful knee strike towards the nerves near his abdomen.

Harry was forced to halt his attack and side step the knee. At the same time, his left leg came up and he further diverted Katrina's attack with his shin. Her entire leg spun away from Harry, forcing her body to go with it and leaving her open for him to deliver a swift strike to her kidneys.

Or so he thought.

Continuing her spin, Katrina managed to make a full three hundred and sixty degree turn, coming out with a surprise snap kick that Harry could not see coming due to her body being turned away from him at the time.

Harry could only thank the high heavens for his incredible reaction time and reflexes, which had always given him an unfair advantage in any sport he played in (whether it was martial arts, football, or Quidditch), that allowed him to duck under the kick. At the same time, his hands came up and pushed Katrina's leg higher as he stood up, knocking the woman off balance.

Wanting to capitalize on his sudden advantage, Harry moved in for the kill. His right hand shot out and grabbed the blond woman's wrist, where he then proceeded to pull her towards him, sending her stumbling towards him as he prepared to send his knee into her gut.

At least, that was his plan. Before it was derailed.

Quicker than Harry could comprehend, Katrina reversed their position and it was now *she* who had an iron clad hold on *his* wrist. The young Potter heir only had enough time to realize that the entire set up had been a feint before Katrina spun around so that her back was facing him and used his own weight and momentum to toss him over her shoulder.

Harry quickly found himself airborne, his body flipping over Katrina's, his wrist still clamped in her hands. The young man just barely managed to twist himself over so that he landed on his feet and not his back as the

young blond woman had probably planned.

He must have surprised her because there was no follow up attack. Deciding to use his small window of opportunity, Harry managed to free himself from her grasp, placed both hands on the ground, and sent a powerful double mule kick towards the woman.

It didn't hit. Whether she was surprised or not, Katrina had a lot of combat experience, and her body was predisposed towards reacting with very little thinking on her part. It was instinctual.

She moved backwards exactly two steps, ensuring Harry's feet would miss her by the smallest of margins. Katrina then came back in, slapping his two feet so that his legs spread apart before they hit the ground, then sent her heel directly into Harry's kidney.

The young man grunted in pain as he felt the blow to his body and collapsed on the ground. Thankfully it was diminished, both by the fact that Harry knew a breathing method that allowed the damaged area to 'deflate' a bit and cushion the blow, and Katrina kicking him with less force than she would if the fight were serious.

"First point goes to Katrina," Master Wei said, rather unnecessarily in Harry's opinion. He was well aware of the hit he had taken. The man did not need to rub it in.

Katrina moved back, allowing Harry to get back on his feet. She gave him a grin when he turned to face her.

"Not bad, Harry," she praised him as she bowed to him. "You've improved a lot in the two years I've been gone. I'm impressed."

Harry returned the bow, and couldn't help but smile a bit at the praise. Aside from Master Wei, Katrina was the only person he actually respected that came to this place. Out of all the other members who practiced here, she was the only one aside from himself who actually took their training seriously. She might even be more serious about it than him, given that she had actually participated in tournaments while he had not.

"Thank you," Harry said. "I've been practicing a lot so that the next time you visited I would be able to match you."

"Well, I don't know about match," Katrina grinned. "But you've definitely improved."

"His improvement was only from the previous year," Master Wei informed her. "Harry has not improved at all this year."

"That's because I'm going to a boarding school and there is no one there who can spar with me," Harry informed the much older male. It was an excuse, he knew, but he felt it was a justifiable one. A person could only improve so much through shadow sparring and practicing forms. "No one there actually knows any martial arts, and it's not like I can just go up to some random person and ask them to fight me."

"Hmph," Master Wei grunted. "The sounds of excuses mean nothing to me."

Harry sighed at the man's words. Knowing that no matter what he said nothing would change his Master's opinion, the young boy turned his attention back to an obviously amused Katrina.

"I didn't expect you to know Jui juitsu," the invitation for an explanation was there, and Katrina grinned at his words.

"I only know a bit," she told him. "I picked it up during the tournament. One of the people I fought was a master at Jui juitsu, and I felt there would be an advantage in learning how to throw people who weighed more than I did around like a rag doll, so I asked him to teach me."

"Ah."

Harry nodded his head at her explanation before moving back towards his original place on the mat. He turned back to look at Katrina, already in position again, and raised an eyebrow.

"So..." he began, letting the adrenaline he felt still running through his body pick up once more at the anticipation of continuing with another round. "Ready for round two?"

XoX

The spar between Katrina and Harry lasted a little over an hour before they decided to call it quits. Harry was pleased to discover that while Katrina had improved quite a bit since the last time he had seen her, Harry had improved more. The gap between their abilities, while still noticeable, was considerably smaller than it had been since the last time they sparred, which was evident when Harry managed to score several points by landing a few decisive blows on her during this session.

After taking a shower in the small shower stalls attached to the locker room, Harry changed back into his new blue jeans and his white undershirt with a red button up collared shirt combination.

He gave a quick goodbye to Master Wei, who told him that he expected Harry to come in at least every other day so he could actually improve (something which got Harry to almost roll his eyes as he knew the Master was talking about how he had not improved during the school year), and Katrina, who had given him a big hug that nearly cracked his back and told him they would spar some more later. He then left the Dao and began his walk towards Lisa's House.

The weather outside was very warm. It was the beginning of summer so it was not as hot as it could be, but Harry expected that to change within a few weeks or so.

Walking to Lisa's house from Master Wei's Dao only took somewhere around fifteen minutes. Harry soon found himself standing in front of the front door and pressing the doorbell.

The ring from his actions echoed inside of the house and was easily heard by Harry, who stood back and waited for someone to answer the door. The sound of rushing footsteps told him immediately who that would be.

It came as no small surprise to see Lisa on the other side of the door after it opened. The now twelve year old girl was all dressed and looked ready to leave. She was wearing a long sleeveless yellow shirt that stopped at about mid thigh and a pair of blue jeans. Around her wrists was a silver bracelet with several charms that he had gotten her for her

recent twelve birthday. Her outfit was finished by a pair of multi-strapped sandals that wrapped around her ankle, near the arches of her feet, and her toes.

She had grown her hair out since he had last scene her during Christmas. What had once been short hair that stopped exactly at her shoulders was now down just a few inches past them. She had also styled it into princess curls, which Harry actually thought looked quite nice on her from an objective standpoint.

"Hey, Harry," Lisa greeted with a bright smile before the two shared in a quick hug. It was actually becoming much easier for Harry to show the girl physical affection these days. Ever since Christmas when he realized that he had not been the best friend he could be to his best friend, Harry had made a concerted effort to treat the girl better and not just show her affection on rare occasions.

When they broke apart, Harry offered the girl another smile as he complimented her on her choice of wardrobe.

"Those clothes look good on you," he said, grinning just a tiny as he saw Lisa's cheeks flush with red as blood rushed to them. It was always interesting to see the normally confident and loud Lisa Crawft embarrassed. Such events only ever happened during moments like these. He had actually read about it in some of his psychology books, how even some of the most confident people became inexplicably shy when they are complimented or praised by people who are important to them.

Well, so long as those important people aren't parents at any rate. He had actually read that most children tend to get annoyed when their parents compliment them. Of course, it was usually produced by embarrassment of a sort as well. It came about when children wanted to be seen as adults and didn't want their parents coddling or embarrassing them in front of their peers. He had seen many examples of this on his way to school when children would be dropped off by their parents.

Of course, all of this was second hand knowledge he learned from a book or observed from Lisa's interactions with her mother. Since his parents

had died when he was one, Harry had no real experience with embarrassing parents.

"Thanks, Harry," Lisa mumbled, her head tilted down as she stared at her feet, the left of which was currently making circular patterns on the ground.

"So is your mum ready?" asked Harry, bringing Lisa out of her embarrassed state and focusing on the present.

"Almost," Lisa said, taking Harry by the hand and pulling him inside. "She's still getting dressed, I think."

Harry shut the door behind him with his free hand as his best friend proceeded to drag him into the living room. The pair sat down on the couch and Harry proceeded to listen to Lisa as she told him everything there was to know about the second half of her semester at school.

"So how was it at your boarding school?" Lisa asked carefully, her voice suggesting she was still a bit put out by him going to a school that was not hers. He understood her feelings, even shared them to an extent, though he did not regret going to Hogwarts.

"It was enjoyable," Harry replied, earning an eye roll from Lisa at his use of a word with more than two syllables. "I learned a lot, more than I would have at any other school I should think." At least he learned more than he would have at any non magical school. Harry was unaware of whether or not there were any other magical institutes aside from Hogwarts, though he assumed there were at least a few in other countries.

He looked back over at Lisa to see her frowning a little. Guessing that it was because of him actually enjoying school without her, Harry scooted a bit closer, close enough that he could wrap an arm around her shoulder.

"I did miss my best friend very much though," Harry added in a slightly softer tone. And it was true. While he had actually made a number of people he considered friends, surprising since his initial plans for his friends was to simply use them in order to cement his power base within Hogwarts and beyond that after they all graduated, that did not change the fact that he had missed his best and first friend terribly. "School

wasn't quite the same without you."

Lisa gave him a grateful smile before leaning her head on his shoulder.

"I missed you lots too," she said, her tone and way of speaking sounding a bit more childish than it normally did. It just went to show Harry how much she had really missed him. Thanks to his continued presence, Lisa had quite the vocabulary, and was normally a bit more eloquently spoken than the average twelve year old because of it. That changed when she was experiencing strong emotions like now. Unlike Harry, who was quite literally a walking dictionary, thesaurus and encyclopedia all in one, Lisa tended to forget the more complex words she knew during occasions like this.

Harry didn't say anything to reply. Instead he just allowed the girl to rest her head against his shoulder and allowed them both to take comfort in each others presence.

It was moments like these that assured Harry that he was not like Voldemort. The words that man had spoken to him down there with the mirror or Erised had honestly, truly, frightened him. That he could actually be similar to the man he hated more than anything in this world, the man who had killed his parents, was beyond terrifying to him.

After having met Voldemort for the second time, Harry was truly appreciative that he had met Lisa and Master Wei when he was younger more than he ever had before. Had he not, there was a very good chance he would have turned out exactly like the dark lord.

The snap of a camera going off alerted him to the fact that someone else had entered the room while he and Lisa were sitting on the couch in silence. The fact that a camera taking a picture was heard told Harry who had entered before looking.

Turning their heads, he with the same expression he usually wore when this happened while Lisa had a 'deer caught in the headlights' look, the pair saw a grinning Anastasia Crawft looking at them with a camera in her hands. And while Lisa looked absolutely horrified by the sight, Harry was just glad that Lisa's father was currently at work. It saved him from getting glared at.

"Oh, look at you two! You are so cute together!"

"Mum!"

Yes, very glad.

XoX

The days began to get hotter as summer continued. A week had passed since Harry Potter returned from Hogwarts. The young man had managed to split his time by working himself into a routine.

The first thing Harry did every morning was head over to Master Wei's Dao. There he would usually find himself sparring against either the Master himself or Katrina, who said she was planning on sticking around for the next two months for summer break.

Harry would admit he preferred sparring with Katrina than he would Master Wei any day of the week. It was nothing personal against his teacher or anything, it was just that Harry did not like getting utterly humiliated every time he sparred against someone. And while Katrina had a lot more experience over him, their skills in their respective fighting styles were about equal, with the young woman being just a little bit better.

After spending an hour or two working up a good sweat and getting his body bruised up, Harry would go to Lisa's house. He had made it a point to spend as much time with her as possible, knowing that when summer ended, he would not see her again until Christmas.

The two of them would do many things together. Sometimes they would go into London to see a movie or window shop. At other times they would go to the park and have a picnic. Still, there were other times when the two would just stay at home watching movies. It didn't really matter what they did, according to Lisa, so long as they were doing it together.

When the day began nearing its end, Harry would usually pack up and head to the Dursleys', where he would do the chores Petunia wanted him to do as per their arrangement. Usually this consisted of cleaning, gardening, and mowing the lawn. Harry would admit he cheated when it

came to chores, often using his magic instead of actually doing manual labor. Still, it got the job done and in less than one tenth of the time, and so long as the Dursley's didn't see it, there would be nothing to worry about.

Out of sight out of mind as the old saying went.

At the end of the day, Harry would head up to his room and begin studying. There was a lot he had to work on, and not just with learning the secrets of the Philosopher's Stone. As someone who believed in having a good education, Harry had decided to take accelerated summer courses for his non magical education. Essentially, what he did was self study, and at the end of every week he would go in to the local school and do testing in order to advance to the next level.

Already he had taken his first test for the accelerated course. He had aced it, naturally. At the moment he was already farther ahead of his non magical education than he should be. Several years ahead at least. He didn't even need to study for his courses right now, and likely would not need to until he was in his fourth year at Hogwarts.

His other subject of study was the Philosopher's stone, naturally. Harry had spent a great deal of time trying to work out the mysteries surrounding it's power. How did it work? What made up the Philosopher's Stone? How was it made? How did one go about making the elixir of life? Or turn metal into gold? Harry wanted answers to these questions and more.

It was most unfortunate that many of those questions seemed impossible to answer.

Walking over to the desk after pulling the Philosopher's Stone from within his trunk, Harry sat down and moved the open books he had on Alchemy off to the side.

He placed his elbow on the desk, the Philosopher's Stone in his hand being held up to his face. The stone's blood red surface was polished to a shine and glowed with an inner power the likes of which Harry had not seen on another item.

Even after a week of reading every book he had on Alchemy and doing a number of spells designed to detect the magics on an item, Harry had discovered very little about the powerful artifact. The only power he had discovered was how to make the elixir of life, which had been surprisingly easy.

After taking an empty vial and setting it on his desk with the top facing the ceiling, Harry grabbed a small knife in his free hand. Using the knife, he cut a small slit across the hand that was holding the Philosopher's Stone and began channeling his magic into his hand as he held the now dripping with red fluid appendage over the vial.

It was interesting to watch as the blood dripping from his hand became crystal clear. The Philosopher's Stone began to glow even more brightly as the very composition of his blood was changed into a potent liquid capable of prolonging ones life and even bringing those who are on the brink of death back from where they stood with their foot in the grave.

This was the reason Voldemort had wanted the stone so badly. The Elixir of Life was, surprisingly, the only aspect of the stone he had uncovered. And much as he would have liked to admit that it had taken weeks of meticulous study, the truth was he had discovered how to make the Elixir of Life by accident when he had cut his hand while holding the stone.

Still, even with this major disappointment Harry could not say he was depressed at his lack of progress. The Philosopher's Stone was the height of alchemy. An item so powerful and complex that only one person had created it to date. The magics within this stone were likely beyond those of any of the books he had on alchemy.

And it wasn't like he didn't have a few theories on how the stone worked. Or at least, theories on how and why the Philosophers Stone could create the Elixir of Life. It was just that he had no ways to test those theories.

The liquid trickled from his hand into the vial, filling it at a very slow rate. Harry was sure there was a more efficient method for creating the Elixir of Life. He doubted very highly that Nicholas Flamel or his wife would use such an inelegant method for creating the life prolonging liquid.

Unfortunately for Harry, he had yet to discover that method, and so he was stuck using this particular means of getting what he wanted.

When the vial was flow, Harry cut the flow of magic to the stone, then set it down on the desk before redirecting his magic to heal the self inflicted wound on his hand without even leaving a scar. He put a stopper on the vial, sealing it tight. Then moved back to his trunk, vial and Philosopher's Stone in hand.

His trunk was one of those expensive multi-compartment trunks that only extremely wealthy purebloods owned. Most pureblood wizards bought them as a means of showing off their wealth and status. Harry bought his for it's functionality. It was a four compartment trunk, and each compartment was about the size of a large walk in closet. Harry used the compartments to contain all of the items and tomes he had that were magical in nature.

The first compartment contained his clothes whenever he went to Hogwarts. Right now, all they were carrying was his wizarding robes, both his school robes and his dress robes. His second compartment was his library. It was essentially an open spaced room in the center with book shelves lining all four walls and containing various magical scrolls and tomes. The third compartment contained his potions brewing kit and all of the potions he created, as well as items related to potion brewing such as his potioneer's bandolier and his brass scales. The last compartment was the one he used to keep rare and powerful items such as the Philosopher's Stone.

After securing the stone within the fourth compartment, Harry opened the trunk into the third compartment and used the ladder to climb down. The compartment looked like a very basic, very small version of a potioneers lab. Situated against one of the walls was a table with a bunsen burner he had acquired from Diagon Alley, as well as a more advanced potion making kit than the standard one used at Hogwarts, his brass scales and several cauldrons made of either pewter, brass, or bronze. He had several of each.

On either side of the table was a shelf, each one filled with various ingredients he had bought and put preservation charms on to keep them

fresh. The charms would ensure that the ingredients would last for at least a year before corrupting and needing to be replaced.

On the walls to the left and right of the potion making table were more shelves. These shelves were not lined with ingredients, but vials filled with all of the potions Harry had already made. Aging potions, antidotes to common and uncommon poisons, antidotes to Veritaserum, Babbling Beverage, Baruffios Brain Elixir, Blood-Boil Cure and many others all sat on those shelves in topical order.

At the back wall behind Harry sat one more shelf. This one was the most empty shelf of the group. It was a shelf that held several notebooks. Most of the notebooks were written by his mother, who was a potions genius on par with Severus Snape, but there was one that was written by Harry himself. Those notebooks contained notes on how to make the various potions he or his mother created more effective and in less time than the normal recipes called for. Harry hoped to one day fill that shelf completely with notes and equations on his discoveries in the field of potionering.

Making his way over to the right, Harry placed the vial of *Elixir of Life* on the shelf right next to all the other *Elixir of Life* vials. Ever since he had found out how to create the life prolonging liquid, Harry had made a point to make at least two vials worth each day. He didn't know what he would do with them yet, but he was sure he would be able to find a use for them eventually. He then put the Philosopher's Stone within the fourth compartment.

With his work done, the young Potter heir made his way back up to his room and unhurriedly walked over to his desk. He took out several sheets of paper and a calligraphy pen, and then began writing.

Seeing how the first week of summer had ended, Harry figured enough time had passed that he could write letters to his friends without seeming to be nosy. His letters contained all the standard questions, asking them how they were doing and how their summer was so far.

He also made sure to personalize each letter as it would not do to sound impersonal with his friends. Harry wanted them to know that he really did care about how they were doing and not think that he was just writing to

them out of obligation.

Once he had finished writing for his friends, Harry waited for the thirty seconds it took for Hedwig to realize her partner wanted her to deliver some letters.

The snowy white owl that had become an important part of Harry's life soon swooped in through the window and landed on his desk next to his stack of alchemy books. Hedwig looked at him, her head tilting and twisting before she gave a short hoot that sounded almost like a reprimand.

"Sorry," Harry apologized with an apologetic shrug. "I had not realized you were out hunting. I had always assumed you did that during the night."

Another hoot was his response.

"Well, I suppose that would make sense. I doubt most mice living in a community like this would be out during the night."

A third hoot.

"Not mice?" When Hedwig hooted again, Harry grimaced. "I see. Please refrain from killing off too many snakes if you can. I rather like snakes. Oh!" Harry quickly perked up, as if just realizing something, "and if you see a gardener snake out in the back yard, don't eat him, ok? He helps me keep small mammals from eating the flowers."

Hedwig stared at him for a moment, and Harry could have sworn her eyes narrowed. When she hooted again, he rolled his eyes.

"I am sure you could do just as good a job at rodent control as he does," Harry reassured her. "However, if you wanted to keep the flower garden clear of pests, you would have to stay there for most of the day, and I know how much you enjoy flying long distances during your hunts."

That seemed to placate his strangely intelligent animal partner. Hedwig gave a more understanding hoot, then lifted her leg so he could attach the letters to it.

"I'll be sure to have some treats for you when you get back," Harry told the white bird as he let his fingers gently brush against the crest of feathers on her head. "Maybe some bacon?"

The owl's intelligent amber eyes lit up at the mention of bacon, one of her apparent favorite foods. She gave him a soft nip on the fingers, then quickly flew out of the open window and into the dusky sky.

Harry watched as Hedwig disappeared into the setting sun, then turned his attention back to his last letter, one he had not written for his friends, but for the true owner of the Philosopher's Stone. Nicholas Flamel. With the week up, most of the books he had on alchemy read, and every scan he had done on the stone itself coming up with inconclusive results, it was about time for Harry to return the powerful object to its rightful owner.

Dear FN,

You do not know who I am, and considering the sensitive information contained within this letter, I would rather not say. Just know that I am a student attending Hogwarts, which recently played host to an item that belongs to you.

I am sure you have already received a missive about this particular item being lost by someone we are both acquainted with. I wish to inform you that the information you have been given is incorrect. The item in question is currently in my possession.

I wish to give this item back to you, but dare not send it with a letter. Should you desire it back, please send me a means by which I can return the item in question so that I might return it to its rightful owner.

Sincerely,

A well-meaning student.

Harry looked over the letter with a small frown. It sounded a bit cagey, like he was some kind of criminal, or at least someone who dealt in shady and possibly illegal affairs. Still, there wasn't much he could do about that. He did not want to write anything that could link this letter back to him or inform someone of what the item he mentioned was should the

letter be intercepted somehow. Even just mentioning it was at Hogwarts was taking a risk, and if it weren't for the fact that mentioning Hogwarts was the only way to inform Nicholas Flamel that the item was the Philosopher's Stone without straight out telling him, he would not have done so.

With a sigh, Harry sealed the letter in an envelope with plain wax with no Coat of Arms. It would be unwise to have any identifying marks on the envelope that could lead someone back to him. He wasn't going to leave things to chance. Not with an item this powerful.

Standing up, Harry began to stretch his arms over his head, groaning as his back cracked and his muscles were stretched out.

He was bit more sore today than usual, he noticed. Probably because of all the sparring he was doing these days. Harry made a mental note to do some more stretches before heading over to the Dao for his morning sparring session. It wouldn't do to get muscle cramps.

Bringing his arms back down, Harry grabbed the most recent book on alchemy he had started reading. A book titled *Alchemy, All You Need to Know*. It was suppose to be what amounted to an intermediate book on Alchemy, and was written by the same person who wrote *Alchemy for Beginners*.

Sitting down on his bed and using his pillows as support against his back as he leaned against the headboard, Harry flipped the page open to where he had been reading previously and began memorizing the information contained within the pages.

He would send the letter to Nicholas Flamel next week. After he had made a few more vials worth of *Elixir of Life*.

This is the first chapter for the next series of my Harry Potter fics. I hope you all enjoyed this chapter, and that you let me know how you felt about it. For those of you who are concerned about Katrina, my newest OC, don't be. She isn't going to have any roll beyond 'sparring partner for Harry during the summer of second year'. I doubt you'll even see her beyond this chapter and maybe the

second one.

Please be sure to let me know what you liked so I can keep doing it, and what you don't like so I can possibly make changes and corrections to improve my story. I am always looking for constructive criticism to help me improve as a writer.

Letters

Chapter 2: Letters

Harry quickly spun away from the heel kick aimed at his midsection. As his body began rotating a full three hundred and sixty degrees, his left palm shot out and knocked the kick away by striking his opponents calf. Before completing his spin, the elbow of his right arm came up in an attack that would have dislocated his opponent's jaw if it struck.

Naturally, the attack didn't.

Katrina darted backwards by one step, then came back in with a powerful one-two high kick, low kick combination that forced Harry to back pedal. The attacks were so fast that one of the kicks, one aimed towards his head, actually managed to graze Harry's nose, shaving off a single epidermis layer of his skin.

This did not faze Harry one bit. If anything, the close call left him more excited for this sparring session than before.

The two continued to trade blows, attacking and counter attacking with their respective styles. It was easy to see both the similarities and differences contained within their respective fighting styles. Both styles of combat relied on speed, the use of human weak points, and powerful counter attacks designed to take out an enemy with a single strike. The differences lay in their movements.

Katrina was a form of grace and elegance. Every move she made led into her next one. Her attacks flowed together like a stream of water that never ended unless broken up by Harry. At the same time her movements were instinctive and unpredictable. Harry doubted even Katrina herself knew what her next attack would be. And while it was possible to determine what her next move would be when she used a longer range of motion, those moments were rare. She had a very minimalist approach to combat.

At the opposite end of the spectrum was Harry. His moves, while holding all the grace of a dancer, were much more flashy and straightforward. He spun and ducked and weaved and jumped, constantly moving around the woman he was sparring as he continued to look for an opening he could extrapolate on. There was a much wider range of motion in his attack pattern. It was both an advantage and disadvantage. It gave him a much wider range of attacks and positions he could exploit, but it also used more energy and a skilled practitioner of martial arts could come up with a number of counters to his style.

Of course, that just gave him more incentive to get better.

Their styles were also different in how they used their bodies. Katrina stuck mainly to using her feet for attacks and her hands to parry attacks, only using them for the occasional sneak attack towards his throat or another place around his neck and head. Harry did not confine himself to just using those four appendages for attack or defense, he also utilized his elbows and knees to great effect, as his sparring partner found out a number of times in recent days.

It was clear by now that the pair had been at this for a while now. Harry and Katrina were both covered in a layer of sweat, their uniforms were sticking to their bodies and sweat was liberally flying off both hair and skin as they danced around each other.

Equally obvious was that neither really wanted this spar to end. The two were tied for the number of hits this session had, and their competitive streak was at an all time high. Especially Harry's, who wondered if this would be the day he finally beat Katrina in a spar.

There was an old saying that all good things must eventually end, and that unfortunately included this spar. The end came not from a decisive hit that gave one or the other a clear-cut victory, but from Katrina accidentally slipping on the layer of sweat that had been accumulating on the sparring mat.

"WOAH!"

"OOF!"

It was an awkward position that the two found themselves in after Katrina's unfortunate fall. She had been mid kick, aiming at the left side of Harry's torso when she slipped. Harry had moved forward, prepared to throw her attack off course with a well placed parry and then counter with a double palm thrust to the chest when she had slipped. And because she had slipped, her foot ended up moving high than he had anticipated, knocking him upside the head with her metatarsal's and phalange's actually managing to hook themselves around the back of his head and drag her down into him. The end result was Katrina falling onto her back with Harry Potter falling face first into Katrina's sweat soaked chest.

"Oh my," Katrina giggled impishly as she stared down at Harry's hair with a teasing grin as she fluttered her eyelashes at the raven haired boy. "So forward, Mister Potter. Don't you know you're supposed to at least take a woman on a date first before trying something like this, you naughty little boy you."

Even Harry, who cared very little for romance, understood the woman's words and their meaning. He personally blamed Lisa for that. Lisa and those trashy romance novels she read so much.

Quick as a flash, Harry jerked his face out of Katrina's cleavage, his face flush with embarrassment. His movements jerky and somewhat mechanical, Harry moved to stand up, rubbing his face furiously as he hissed at the woman, "must you always be like this?"

Katrina smiled at him, obviously enjoying the boys discomfort.

"Like what?"

"Like... like that!" Harry snapped, still embarrassed by their previous position and her words. Strangely enough, despite these two facts, he still held out a hand to help her up. It comes with being a gentlemen. "Ever since you returned you've been saying things like this. I don't need that kind of innuendo in my life." He got enough of that as it was, what with his best friend being so into those trashy books she called novels.

"Aw, you need to lighten up, Harry," Katrina said with a grin as she was helped to her feet. "Seriously, you're always so uptight. You need to learn to live a little."

"I know perfectly well how to 'live a little' as you say," Harry said much more calmly. Now that he had gotten his breathing rate back under control, he was more than able to put those occlumency lessons to good use. They worked quite well at returning him to his normal calm state of mind, not to mention returning his skin color to its normal tan. "I simply do not understand your need to tease me with sexual advances. I am only eleven years old."

"I'm not teasing you," Katrina said, then paused. "Well, maybe I am a little, but it's all for your own good. You need to loosen up some. Every time I see you you're always so focused, so fixated on your goals that you don't stop to smell the roses."

Harry frowned at his sparring partner and somewhat friend.

"I am perfectly capable of relaxing. It's just that there is a time and place for everything, and the moments where you and I see each other just so happen to not be the time and place for me to relax."

Katrina rolled her eyes.

"Oh, so the only time you allow yourself to relax is when you're around your little girlfriend?"

Harry's brow furrowed.

"My who?"

"Your girlfriend," Katrina repeated. When she saw Harry's clueless expression her own face deadpanned. "That Lisa girl you're always hanging around with outside of Master Wei's Dao."

"Lisa?" Harry frowned. While it was true that Lisa was his best friend and a girl, he wasn't sure why Katrina would actually call him out on that. She couldn't possibly mean the romantic connotations the word 'girlfriend' was often used in. He and Lisa were practically family. Being romantically involved with her would just be weird. And that wasn't even going into the fact that they were only eleven and twelve respectively.

That also wasn't going into the fact that he was a wizard famous for

surviving the unsurvivable killing curse and she was non magical human. That alone opened up a whole slew of issues that he just did not want to get into right now. God only knows what would happen if the purebloods of the wizarding world found out he was dating someone who wasn't a witch.

Speaking of Lisa, he had to meet up with her soon. They were going to catch a new movie at the cinema, and it would not due for him to be late.

With that thought in mind, Harry turned his head towards the single, solitary clock in the room to check the time.

His eyes promptly widened and his face paled.

"Shit!"

Rare were the times where Harry Potter would actually swear. To Harry, swearing was a very crass, crude and inelegant way of expressing oneself, and was not befitting someone of a higher intellect. For someone who prided themselves on their mental prowess even more than they did their physical prowess, the very act of swearing was somewhat of a taboo for him.

That being said there were moments when he had slipped. Three moments to be precise. Once when he had accidentally blown up his room the first time he had started experimenting with his magic. Another time when he had turned his uncle into a walrus when the man had told him that he would not be allowed to learn martial arts. The third time was during the troll incident, a nightmare of a moment that he sometimes wished he could forget.

And now he could add a forth time to the number of times he had cursed.

"I am so late!" Harry bemoaned. Almost forgetting himself completely in his haste, Harry offered both Master Wei and Katrina a hasty bow before bolting towards the back room, where the sound of a shower soon began running.

Only a few minutes later, Harry came back out, his hair still dripping wet, dressed in a pair of black designer jeans, converse shoes and a green

shirt with a slitted, yellow dragon eye in the center.

"Oh man, Lisa is going to kill me!"

And while he was rushing towards the door, the other two occupants in the room watched him with mild amusement.

"Have fun with your girlfriend, Harry!" Katrina offered a parting shot as she waved her hand jauntily to him. It was a testament to how frantic Harry was that he completely ignored the woman's words, instead making due haste towards the door, which he soon bolted out of.

In the quiet that now pervaded the room, the only sound that stirred was the gentle thrumming of the air conditioning unit.

"So..." Katrina broke the silence, turning to the seventy year old martial arts master standing a few feet away. "Any idea who won this time?"

XoX

Harry cursed himself as he ran towards his best friend's house. He was running half an hour late. No doubt Lisa would not be too pleased with him when he finally showed up on her doorstep.

How could he have possibly forgotten what time it was? Harry normally had an incredible sense of time. His internal clock was so precise that he was almost always able to tell exactly what time it was based simply on how many hours his mind remembered passing within a twenty four hour period. To forget something as mundane as the passage of time was troubling to him.

Perhaps there really was something to that old adage 'time flies when you're having fun'. Harry knew that he sometimes tended to delve into his studies and training to the point that he needed to remind himself of how much time had passed, but those points were few and far between. Far enough that he never thought much of them.

He could only assume the difference lay in who he was sparring. Katrina was a dream to spar against. She was an incredible martial artist. Not as good as Master Wei, but closer to Harry's own level of skill. That made

her his favorite sparring partner because it wasn't so ridiculously easy to fight her it was not worth it, but he didn't get outright beaten either.

Of course, now he was late because of their spar and Lisa was sure to be upset at him.

Sure enough, Harry arrived to see Lisa standing outside of the door to her house. Her longer hair was braided in french braids and she was wearing a light blue sundress and sandals on her feet. The charm bracelet he had gotten her was conspicuously absent.

That was the first sign he saw that she was upset, but it was not the last. Her left foot was tapping on the ground, her arms were crossed over her chest and her lips drawn into a thin line. All of these were signs of agitation and anger. She was most definitely not pleased with him. A fact that only became more known to Harry when her eyes caught sight of him and narrowed.

"Lisa..." shifted uncomfortably, not used to the stare down she was giving him. Perhaps because the few times something like this had happened in the past he had not cared as much. It was hard to say. "I am so sorry. I got caught up sparring with Katrina and hadn't realized how much time had passed."

"Oh? You got caught up sparring with Katrina, did you?" she asked, her tone clipped. Harry didn't quite manage to withhold his wince. "I see. Well, I suppose I could understand. I mean, it's not like you had promised your best friend you would take her to see Aladdin today." Harry didn't even bother trying to hold his wince in this time. He knew he had screwed up terribly. All he could do now was run damage control.

"I'm so sorry," Harry walked up closer to Lisa so he could grab her hand and rub it consolingly. She withdrew her hand before he could even grab it however, the act hurting much more than he thought it would. "Lisa..."

"Let's just go," Lisa's tone was still clipped, still angry, but the anger was just being used to mask the hurt she felt. Harry knew this, which is why he felt so horrible. Even though it wasn't like he had forgotten his promise to her, the fact that he had made a promise and ran late enough that he might not be able to keep it was just as bad in many ways. It made him

seem callous.

Harry sighed as he followed Lisa into the house and towards the living room where Misses Crawft was speaking in hushed tones with Mister Crawft. Harry could not hear what they were saying. He could have probably enhanced his sense of hearing using the enhancing abilities his animagus form had given him, but felt it would be a violation of their rights so refrained.

The two adults noticed him and Lisa, and while Mister Crawft's lips thinned in barely masked annoyance, Misses Crawft smiled. A smile which left when she noticed that Lisa and Harry were not holding hands like they usually did.

"Are you two ready?" she asked.

"Yes," Lisa answered crisply, causing Misses Crawft to furrow her brows in concern as she looked back and forth between the two. Mister Crawft on the other hand, looked intrigued by this new development. Harry could only imagine how happy the man would be to learn his daughter was upset with him.

"In that case we should get going," Anastasia Crawft got back on track. "We won't make the nine o'clock showing, but we should be able to make the nine fifteen one if we leave now."

"Good," Lisa nodded her head. "Harry has a promise to keep and we wouldn't want him to break it."

Behind her, Harry flinched. He had never seen his best friend quite this mad before. Even the few other times something similar had happened she had never been upset. She would pout and complain, and then go right back to smiling at him. This was a completely new situation, and Harry was at a loss on how to deal with it.

Misses Crawft frowned a bit, before turning to her husband. She narrowed her eyes when she saw him looking interestedly at the rift that seemed to have opened between their daughter and her best friend, but didn't comment on it.

"We should be back around one or two o'clock," she told him, forcing him to look in her direction.

"Right, I'll see you when you get back," Mister Crawft kissed his wife on the cheek before walking towards his office. On his way there, he spared another glance towards Lisa and Harry, his eyes catching the young boy's before he disappeared down the hallway.

"Come along you two," Misses Crawft said as she began leading Harry and Lisa to the garage where the car awaited. The trip there was very silent; Lisa was all but ignoring Harry and Harry was trying to think of some way to make the situation between them right again. Misses Crawft may have said something, but she seemed to sense the tension between the two and decided remaining silent may be the best option.

They got in the car, Lisa and Harry getting in the back while Misses Crawft got into the drivers seat. It wasn't more than a minute later that the group of three found themselves out of the garage and on the road.

Harry glanced over at Lisa, who had yet to look his way once since Harry's apology. She was instead looking out the window, her elbow resting on the sill and her chin resting on the butt of her hand.

He sighed. What should he do? How could he make this right? He had already apologized, but that didn't seem to be working. What else could he do? What else was there to do?

Harry wished there was some kind of book that would at least give him some insight into the proper methods of apologizing worked. Unfortunately, no one seemed to have written such a book so he was stuck with his own thoughts and ideas for now.

Backtracking, Harry allowed his mind to focus on Lisa and his apology once more. Simply saying 'I'm sorry' had apparently been inefficient in getting his desired affect, that being his best friends forgiveness. What else could he do?

Bringing his thoughts to Lisa, Harry focused his considerable mental prowess on his friends likes in the hopes he could find the means to earn her forgiveness there. What did she like that he could use to have her

forgive him? She loved the color green, she enjoyed dressing up, her favorite movie was One Hundred and One Dalmatians, she appreciated physical contact like holding hands and hugging, she also loved those trashy romance novels. She had hundreds of likes and little quirks that he could name. But which one would help him get back in his friends good graces?

He looked back over at Lisa, who he noticed was looking back at him as she worried her lower lip between her teeth. The moment she realized he was looking at her, she huffed and went back to staring out the window. And it was in that moment that Harry realized there may be a way for him to earn her forgiveness.

A quick glance at the drivers seat showed that Misses Crawft was focusing entirely on her driving, seemingly ignoring him and Lisa. Good.

After taking care to unbuckle as silently as possible so as not to alert Misses Crawft as to what he was doing, Harry scooted over to the middle seat, which was usually occupied by Lisa and buckled up again.

By now, Lisa had noticed what he was doing and was looking at him. She looked away quickly when he turned to her.

Because of this she did not notice what Harry was doing until his arm wrapped around her shoulder.

Her body stiffened and she nearly squeaked in surprise when he leaned in and kissed her on the cheek, just like what sometimes happened in those books he had forcibly memorized because she constantly read them out loud to him.

"I'm sorry," Harry whispered softly. He took a quick glance at Misses Crawft out of the corner of his eye, thankful when he saw she still wasn't looking at him. He then turned his attention back to Lisa. "I'm really, really sorry. Please, forgive me?"

Lisa shifted a bit in his grasp, turning so she could look at him despite her face being beat red. Her eyes, large, brown, doe-like eyes looked into his as if searching for something. A moment passed. Then two. After several such moments the flush on her cheeks receded and Lisa's eyes

softened. She snuggled herself against him and laid her head on his shoulder.

"You're forgiven," she said simply, her eyes closing. "Just don't do it again."

"It's a promise," Harry said quickly, pleased that he had finally managed to get Lisa to forgive him.

He was so pleased in fact, that he didn't even notice when Misses Crawft looked at the pair in the rear view mirror and smiled.

XoX

Harry arrived at his room after spending an enjoyable day with Lisa and her mother. Granted, it had not started out that way, but things had worked out in the end. Harry had learned a valuable lesson on not getting so lost to his own devices (or to the sparring mat) that he lost complete track of time and would never make the same mistake again, and really, that was all that mattered.

After entering his room, Harry was not surprised to see Hedwig standing on his desk with a handful of letters tied to her leg. It had been two days since he had sent her off, and he knew it would have taken time for his partner to deliver that many letters, especially since he knew that Hedwig would not allow return letters to be sent to him through any other means than her.

She was possessive like that.

"Thank you for delivering those letters for me, Hedwig," Harry said. As he walked over the snowy bird, he waved a hand at his truck, opening it up and bringing freshly cooked and still steaming bacon into his hand.

Of course, it was only considered freshly cooked thanks to the preservation charm he had placed on it. He had learned to do that charm wandlessly just for this purpose.

Hedwig hooted as he walked up to her. Harry stifled a chuckle.

"And thank you for bringing those letters to me," he amended as he gave his feathered friend her treat. As Hedwig gobbled up the bacon with barely disguised glee, Harry efficiently detached the letters tied around her left leg and sat down to read them.

There were ten letters in total, causing Harry to frown. He only had nine people at Hogwarts that he counted as a close friend, and they were the only people he had sent a letter to. So who was the tenth?

He looked at the tenth letter, silently noting that it looked much more official and elegant than the other nine. The envelope was tanned by age and made out of a thicker than normal material. On the front his name was written in elegant yet efficient style of cursive, and on the back was what Harry recognized as a House Crest, even if he did not know which one it belonged to.

A letter from the head of a family than. How intriguing.

The crest started much like most family coat of arms. There was an kite shield, this one much more curved than others he had seen and holding a number of sharp points; one on the left and right respectively, one on the bottom, and two at the top. Within the shield was what looked like a lion, but was very thin and possessing many differences from your average lion. Those being the tail, which had many leafy looking protrusions and three tips flaring out at the end. The lions tongue, which was sticking out of it's mouth, was pointed. It had no mane, but did possess what looked like a very large beard, and was wearing a crown on it's head. The last distinct difference between this lion and a normal one was the palmate leaf grasped firmly in it's left paw as it curled around the leaf like a human hand. Above the lion were the words '*Fluctuat nec mergitur*' or 'He who rises with the wave is not swallowed by it' as the English translation went.

Harry set that letter to the side for now. He would read it after reading the letters from his friends.

The letters he received contained about what he had expected them to. Blaise was leaving for Italy with his mother and sister in a few days and would be out of contact, Lisa was complaining about *her* sister being her

usual bossy and nosy self, Hannah was excited about her trip to America next month, and Hermione was traveling to Florence for a two week vacation with her parents.

Terry wasn't doing much, but he did mention that his parents were actually thinking of buying him one of those muggle telescopes Harry had recommended last year.

Like Terry, Tracey wasn't really doing a whole lot this summer. Her parents were well off, but not rich. They couldn't afford going on extravagant vacations. The most she could expect to do was travel around London and fly on her broom.

Harry made a note to see if he couldn't spend some time with the girl. It must be disappointing to stay at home for three months doing nothing.

Neville wasn't doing any traveling either. Not that he needed to. According to his letter, his grandmother was so impressed by his grades that she had gotten him several very rare magical plants for his greenhouse. Knowing about Neville's love for Herbology, that would be enough to keep him occupied for most of the summer.

The other boy had invited him over some time, stating that his gran would love to have him over for a day. Harry would probably take him up on his offer at some point, though the summer holidays were still young.

Among his friends who was not doing much was Daphne. Despite being from a wealthy and fairly old pureblood family, the most she would be doing this summer was joining her father for some of his political gatherings so he could show off his daughter to potential suitors, or the fathers of potential suitors.

Harry scowled a bit when he thought of Daphne's father. He could not claim to really know the man, as they only met two times, but the things he heard about Nathaniel Greengrass from his daughter was enough to give him an extreme dislike for the man.

If at all possible, Harry planned on getting Daphne out of her house as much as possible. At the very least he planned on seeing if he could convince her father to let her go with he and her other friends while they

went shopping for their school supplies.

Of the letters he received, the most interesting one was from Susan Bones. After all of the usual topics contained within a letter of this nature, she had informed him that her aunt would like to speak with him and had written a letter of her own that she had sent with hers.

Well, that would explain who this last letter belonged to.

Harry looked at the very official looking envelope containing the letter from the person who could only be Amelia Bones. The coat of arms must have been the family crest for the House of Bones.

Wanting to read the letter as soon as possible, Harry decided to get started on replying to the letters he had received from his friends. It took over half an hour, but eventually he managed to finish writing all of the letters he would return to his friends. He would send Hedwig to deliver the letters some time tomorrow.

With his friends letters out of the way, Harry did not hesitate to crack the seal on Madam Bones' letter and pull it out so he could read.

Dear Mister Potter,

I hope you are doing well, and that your summer has been relaxing, for I have received some disturbing information from my niece, Susan, of an incident that occurred during your first year at Hogwarts. I would like very much to speak with you and hear your version of the events that happened at the end of the year. Please inform me of the soonest day you will be available so that I can plan on receiving you at my home.

I look forward to speaking with you and I know that Susan does too.

Sincerely,

Amelia Bones

Harry leaned back in his chair as he went over the letter. It was fairly straight forward and to the point, with little deviation from the main topic. Exactly what he would expect from a woman like Madam Bones. She

really wasn't one for pleasantries, preferring to get straight to the heart of any matter.

That the 'heart of the matter' were the events of his first year intrigued him. He was not surprised that Amelia Bones knew of what happened. Susan had likely told her aunt about the events surrounding the Philosopher's Stone being at Hogwarts, as well as just who was after the stone.

Naturally, this would make the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement intrigued, and possibly wary as well. As the head of the DMLE it was Madam Bones' job to ensure the safety of wizarding Britain. The knowledge that the dark lord who led a reign of terror upon the magical world for several decades might actually be alive and coming out of hiding was definitely something she would be interested in knowing. This meeting was likely so she could learn what really happened and make a plan to deal with Voldemort.

Now how to respond? Obviously this meeting would be held. Even if the letter he received was not giving him what essentially amounted to a very subtle order, Harry would have still agreed to the meeting. One just does not allow the opportunity to gain an ally with such a prominently placed figure in the wizarding world unless they had a few knuts loose. All he needed was to figure out the best day for the meeting to take place.

Hopefully this meeting would give him a powerful ally to fight against Voldemort when the man made his next move.

You guys are fucking awesome. Seriously, 168 reviews on my first chapter. If this keeps up this story is going to be my all time favorite to write.

This chapter is shorter than my last one. I thought about adding Harry's meeting with Amelia but decided that this was a good place to end the chapter at the last moment. It just felt right.

As always, please leave a review to let me know how I did. Did you like this chapter? And if so, what did you like about it? What would you like to see in the future? If you didn't like this chapter, what

would you like to see me change in the future? Giving me your personal opinions is always important so I know what to do and what not to do.

A Meeting with Bones

Chapter 3: A Meeting with Bones

Susan Bones was both excited and nervous. She was excited because her friend, Harry Potter, would actually be coming over to visit. It had only been a week give or take a few days since summer started, and already the person who had made the biggest impact on not just her but all of Hogwarts last year would be coming to her house.

Sure, it was because her aunty wanted to talk to him about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named being alive, but that didn't change the fact that she was going to see him only a week and a half after school had ended. He was even staying over for dinner.

She was also nervous because Harry Potter was coming over for dinner. Harry Potter, the boy who had befriended her and Hannah during the train ride to Hogwarts at the start of the term. Harry Potter, the boy whose knowledge of magic was unparalleled in their year. Harry Potter, who was smart and wise and kind, who had killed a troll in his first year protecting her and her friends, who was unafraid of doing things that went against the flow, who had broken through house barriers and earned the respect of student and teacher alike.

Those weren't the only reasons she was nervous. There was also the fact that she had not had any friends other than Hannah over at her house, ever. Because her aunty was almost always busy with her work, Susan never really got out much, so she never spent much time with other kids. Hannah was the only person her age she spent a considerable amount of time with, and that was because the Abbotts were longtime allies of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Bones.

That is not to say she had only ever spent time with Hannah. There were occasions where she had met with Neville when her aunty would go over to the Longbottom estates for minor politicking and take her with. Their families had run in the same circles for centuries and they tried to maintain those ties.

She had also met with other children from other pureblood families, such as Cormac McGlaggen and Morag MacDougal, but none of them had ever been over to her house for a visit. Ever. Out of all the kids she knew, the only one who had come over, who she had invited over, was Hannah.

And now Harry Potter would be coming over to visit. Harry Potter, her friend and the boy who just so happened to be the Boy-Who-Lived.

So yes, she was nervous. Very nervous. Had been nervous ever since her aunty had told her that Harry was coming over yesterday.

Hundreds of thoughts and questions ran through her mind. All of them coming at the same time, threatening to overload her brain with anxiety. What should she do? How should she act? What should she wear? What would they talk about? Would her aunty hog all of Harry's time? What if he found spending time with her boring? These questions and more consumed her, making her a literal boiling pot of worry and anxiety.

"Are you alright, Susan?"

The sound of her aunty's voice snapped Susan out of her worry long enough to look up and see the woman who had raised her looking at her in concern. She and her aunty were sitting at the breakfast table. Her aunty had apparently finished her English breakfast while Susan had been fretting over today and was now reading the Daily Prophet while drinking a cup of black coffee.

Susan never could understand how her aunty could like coffee so much. It was so bitter.

"I'm fine, aunty," Susan tried to reassure her aunty that there was nothing wrong. She probably shouldn't have bothered. Her aunty always knew when she was lying, and this time was no different.

"It's when you say you're fine that I know you are not fine," the interim Head of the Bones family said in the kind of tone that would have let anyone know this particular situation was not a one time occurrence. And it wasn't. Susan had lost track of the number of times Aunt Amelia had called her bluff like that. "Are you worried about Harry coming over?"

Susan shifted uncomfortably in her seat. She should have known her aunty would figure things out on her own. In a society that was predominantly ruled by men, women do not get far unless they were incredibly gifted and perceptive.

That was why only one woman had risen to a position higher than her aunty. And even to this day, Minister Bagnold's election was suspect of fraud. Though that may have had more to do with how poorly the war against You-Know-Who went when she was in charge rather than because she was a woman.

Of course, there were many pureblood hardliners who said that Minister Bagnold had led the war so poorly *because* she was a woman. That was the reason very few women held high posts anymore.

"Yes," Susan answered truthfully, knowing better to hide her feelings now that the truth was out, if it had ever been hidden to begin with.

"Well you shouldn't," her aunty answered with the same blunt honesty she was known for in politics, albeit, she probably sounded much kinder now than she ever did when dealing with grubby, greedy politicians. "Harry Potter is your friend. He wouldn't have given you that bracelet otherwise."

Susan smiled and looked down at the mention of her bracelet, her hand rising up to her face so she could get a better look at it. There, wrapped snugly around her wrist was the bracelet with animation charms on it that her aunty spoke of. It was almost always on her. The only time she ever took the bracelet off was when she was sleeping and washing herself. She then looked back up at her aunty as worry set in once more.

"But... but what if he doesn't like it here? Or what if he thinks I'm boring?" asked Susan, her tone betraying just how worried she really was. "I'm not open and friendly like Hannah, or interesting and funny like Tracey. I'm not even really smart like Hermione and Daphne." Her shoulders slumped. "I'm just plain old Susan."

Amelia withheld a sigh as she looked at her niece. "Susan, you are anything but plain," she told the young girl. "And you are just as intelligent and interesting as all of those people. You are simply too shy for your own

good. Have more confidence in yourself and stop worrying about whether or not Harry will enjoy his time with you. If he didn't like you for who you are, he would not have spent so much time with you in the first place. And if he doesn't, then he's not worth your time anyways."

The words, despite being somewhat gruff, were spoken with the warmth and reassurance of a parent speaking to their child, and were just what Susan needed to hear.

The young heiress allowed herself to relax and calm down. Her aunty was right. She shouldn't worry so much. Harry had spent plenty of time with her when they were at Hogwarts, and they had spoke one on one a number of times that showed he was interested in her.

That every time they spoke he did most of the talking because she was too shy to really speak her mind was a non issue.

"Thank you, aunty," Susan said appreciatively. Amelia offered her niece a smile.

"Not a problem," her smile grew into a tiny smirk. "Now, I suggest you get dressed, unless you want Harry to see you in your pajamas."

Susan flushed red at the thought of Harry seeing her in her sleepwear. It wasn't like they were showy or anything, just a regular pair of yellow pajama bottoms and a large shirt, but they weren't very appropriate garments to wear when someone was visiting, Hannah notwithstanding.

"Right," Susan squeaked, getting up from the breakfast table and bolting for her room. She didn't hear her aunty chuckling at her as she quickly made her way to her room. Once there, the young red head went over to her closet to try and select something to wear for when Harry came over.

Thirty minutes and several sets of clothing later, Susan was no closer to figuring out what would be appropriate to wear. She had tried on several different outfits and discarded each one for one reason or another. Right now she was trying on a yellow skirt with a black shirt combination that she had picked up in the muggle world.

Unlike most of wizarding society she and her aunty were not wholly

ignorant of their non magical counterparts. They did not know everything about muggles (they knew nothing about cars or airplanes or the new fangled computers that were so hot on the muggle market right now), but they at least knew enough about their clothes to know that muggle clothing was infinitely more comfortable than all but the most expensive of wizarding robes.

Her aunty said it had something to do with how muggle clothing is made, but Susan had forgotten what she had been told.

Susan was so caught up in looking for something appropriate to where that she did not even know her aunty had entered her room until the woman spoke.

"I would suggest wearing your yellow sundress and a pair of sandals."

With a slight squeak of surprise, Susan spun around to see her aunty looking at her with an amused smile.

"Don't do that!" Susan clutched a hand to her breast, causing Amelia Bones to chuckle.

"Sorry," her aunty apologized, still smiling. "But the suggestion still stands. Your yellow sundress will be both comfortable and make you look presentable."

"Ah, right."

Susan quickly found the sundress her aunty had suggested and put it on. Then she was following her aunty down to the study where a large fire place could be seen with a fire blazing away. There they waited for Harry to arrive, which only took a few seconds.

The fire burst into brilliant green, signifying the use of someone flooing their house. A few seconds later, a young man with raven colored hair shot forth from the fire.

Of course, the term 'shot forth' in this instance was very literal.

Susan watched in shock as Harry Potter flew over the heads of herself

and her aunty, his body flipping like some kind of acrobat at a circus. He landed on the floor just a few feet behind them, crouching low with his hands splayed on the ground for balance, forcing them to turn around as he stood from his crouched position and dusted some residue from the floo network off his clothes.

"He certainly knows how to make an entrance," her aunty said with an amused smile. Susan could only nod along in agreement. She had never seen anyone exit the floo network like that, and she herself had only stumbled the first few times she had used the floo.

After dusting himself off, Harry Potter turned around and Susan couldn't quite restrain a gasp.

Harry had dressed himself rather nicely. He was wearing a pair of crisp black slacks that looked like they would fit in both casual and formal settings. His shirt was a button up collared shirt in a green that was several shades short of being black. The top two buttons were undone, showing a hint of muscle mass that did not look like it belonged on a boy of nearly twelve years old.

However, what caught Susan's attention were not his clothes, but his eyes. Harry Potter had always had the most beautiful eyes she had ever seen, and everyone of the girls in her house (and likely many other houses) agreed with that sentiment.

His eyes were still beautiful, still the same shade of killing curse green that looked far more alive than anything else she had ever seen. But where before the eyes had only held a metaphorical glow, now they seemed to be glowing quite literally. It looked like someone had taken a muggle light bulb and supplanted them behind his eyes. The closest instance she could think of that matched what she saw now was the way Headmaster Dumbledore's eyes seemed to twinkle constantly.

Had they always been like that? Or was this some kind of trick of the light?

"My apologies for the... entrance," he said, bowing low enough that his messy hair blocked his face. "For some reason, whenever I use the floo network, I always end up exiting in a rather spectacular manner. I have

yet to resolve this problem."

"Don't worry about that," Aunt Amelia said. It was hard to tell with such a normally stern voice, but Susan could have sworn her aunty sounded amused. "It's not like it's something you can help."

Harry came out of his bow and tilted his head curiously at her. "What do you mean?"

"The way the floo network was enchanted makes it so that the witch or wizard using it is traveling under their own power," Aunt Amelia explained. "I don't know the specifics of *how* it works, but I remember reading in a history text many years ago that when the Ministry of Magic was originally trying to design the floo network, they had tried enchanting it to run off a runic array that worked similar to a muggle battery. The problem with this was that runes can only hold and store so much magic, and the amount of people who began relying on the floo meant the runes had to be recharged every few minutes or so, which caused many of those responsible for keeping it charged to suffer from magical exhaustion."

"I see," Harry murmured as his eyes began to glaze over. Susan recognized his look as one he gave when thinking 'magical jargon' as Tracey had once put it. "So you are saying that the floo runs off the magic of the user, in which case a person who has more magic would end up overpowering the charms and enchantments used on the floo network, thereby forcing them out of the floo faster."

Aunt Amelia raised an eyebrow at the boy, but he seemed almost oblivious to their presence now.

"But that wouldn't explain it all, would it? No. I doubt someone like Albus Dumbledore has such problems with the floo. That would make it a matter of control? Or maybe there is a charm that can limit the amount of magic a user puts into the floo network when traveling? Stabilizing charms, perhaps... or maybe some form of neutralizing charm... hm..."

Before Harry could begin getting too into his theories and whatever else he was thinking, Aunt Amelia coughed into her hand, causing Harry to blush a bit as he realized how he had been ignoring his host.

Susan thought it was adorable.

"My apologies... again. It seems I have forgotten myself."

"It's fine," Aunt Amelia waved his apology away. "I understand you are curious about magic. Susan has told me as much. That being said, I am surprised you are not in Ravenclaw."

"The hat said I would have been well suited towards any of the four houses," Harry said with a shrug, as if being a candidate for all four houses was a minor feat people spoke of as if they were talking about the weather. "I simply chose Gryffindor."

"Because of your parents?" asked Aunt Amelia, sounding curious.

"Partly, though there were other reasons for my decision..." Harry trailed off for a second, then shook his head. "Anyways, I believe we have gotten off track. It's a pleasure to see you again, Madam Bones. You are looking well."

"Good to see you too," Aunt Amelia said, shaking hands with the young boy as he extended his hand for her to grab. "You seem to be in good health."

After they shook hands, Harry turned towards Susan and smiled.

Susan found her face turning hot and she just knew she was blushing.

"It's good to see you, Susan," Harry said, his voice a lot less formal than when he was speaking to her aunty. He eyed her dress for a moment, causing her flush to spread from just her cheeks to the rest of her face. "That dress looks good on you."

"Ah, um, thank you," Susan tried not to squeak. She wasn't quite sure she succeeded.

"Susan," Aunt Amelia said suddenly, her eyes smiling with amusement in a way her lips probably never could. "Why don't you show Mister Potter around the manner. I have a bit of business to attend to before dinner, then the three of us can meet in the dining hall to eat?"

It was obvious to Susan that her aunty was doing this to give her time with Harry before they got to the real reason he was there.

Susan was grateful, really she was. But at the same time, a part of her wished her aunty had not made the suggestion at all. Then she wouldn't be so embarrassed.

"Of course, Aunty," Susan tried her best to steady her breathing. She had been alone with Harry before. There was no need to be so flustered. It would be just like that time they went to the kitchens at Hogwarts.

Yes, just like that. Except they were at her house.

Susan really wished she could just crawl into a whole right now.

She looked over at Harry and gave him a nervous smile. "Follow me, Harry."

XoX

Having never been in a magical household like Bones Manor before, or any magical household (not since his parents at any rate) for that matter, Harry had to admit that if this was the standard most pureblood households held themselves to than he would be impressed.

It probably wasn't, since the Bones were a Founding house, but that was besides the point.

Bones Manor was a Baroque styled mansion. It had exactly five floors and four hundred and sixty-two rooms. According to Susan, who led Harry on the tour, the mansion was built in seventeen fifty-six after the original Bones Manor was destroyed during a siege by the Dark Lord of that time and his minions.

The hallways they wandered were a combination of commanding imposition and spartan elegance. There was very little in the way of decoration, but the floors, walls, and ceiling were made of bone-white marble that was polished to a shine. The few decorations the halls did have were the Baroque Corinthian columns that lined either side of the walls every five feet exactly, the bronze oil lamps that gleamed as the

light reflected off them, and the few magical portraits of past Heads of the Bones family.

Susan did not show Harry many of the rooms, as there were far too many to show in a single sitting. Instead she showed him a few of the more important rooms in the east wing, which was where she and her aunt lived. Apparently the west wing was for political guests and the like. So far she had shown him her Aunt's study, the dining hall, the kitchens, the foyer, several guest rooms, a billiards room, and last but not least, her room.

The room of Susan Amelia Bones was about what he would have expected from someone whose aunt was Amelia Bones. It was girly, yet spartan. The carpet was soft and colored in the same bone white scheme as the rest of the house. The walls were bare of posters like Lisa's room, but it did have a few magical photos featuring a young couple (Susan's parents he presumed), as well as a baby Susan and a younger, less worn looking Amelia.

She had a large walk-in closet on one side and a door leading to what he presumed was the restroom on the other. Her room only had a few commodities; a large Queen sized bed with yellow and black striped sheets and pillows with a badger on it (the Bones family has been predominantly Hufflepuff since 1762), an antique dresser that looked like it had been carved out of bone, a nightstand, a book shelf, and a desk with a comfortable looking chair.

"So... um... this is my room," Susan said softly, looking embarrassed by her room for some reason. Maybe she was afraid he would think it too bare? "It's not much, I know, but..."

"I like it," Harry interrupted, casting his gaze around the room before focusing on the slightly surprised girl standing next to him. He smiled. "There's no clutter, everything is neatly organized, it has a few personal touches but you don't overload the walls with posters and pictures. It suits you."

"Ah... um... thank you," Susan mumbled, suddenly finding her toes to be infinitely more interesting than anything else at the moment.

"So what other rooms does this house possess?" asked Harry, deciding it may be a good idea to change the subject before Susan's head exploded. He didn't know why she was embarrassed, it could have just been due to her natural shyness, but thought it best to switch topics so they could continue conversing. "I mean, this is a pretty large mansion."

"Aunty told me that Potter Manor was actually said to be larger than this," Susan informed him with a slight smile. That smile turned into a sad frown a moment later as another thought seemed to occur to her. "Though that was before it got destroyed during the war against You-Know-Who."

Harry could sense her apprehension about bringing up a topic that should have probably been a sore spot for him. While a part of Harry felt that the knowledge of his families ancient roots had been destroyed should depress him, he couldn't really find it in himself to mourn the destruction of a place he had never been to. The only thing that bothered him was when he thought about all the potential knowledge the Potter's may have held that was now lost to time because that psychopath of a dark lord decided to destroy his family legacy.

Not wanting himself or his friend to dwell on past pains, Harry carefully hooked an arm through one of Susan's and offered the girl a smile. "Why don't you show me around some more," he suggested.

Susan's reaction was immediate. Her face became as red as her hair, the glow of her blush covering not just her entire head all the way to her scalp, but also seeping down below her neck. It was very amusing to see how easily flustered this girl got.

She began trying to calm herself by taking deep breaths, but they didn't seem to work to well. Despite this, she did not make any attempt to remove Harry's arm from her own.

"Ah... yes... of course," Susan stumbled with her words a bit, but gamely tried to keep from letting her embarrassment get to her. "Why don't I... show you some of the other rooms."

And with that, the pair were off once again, walking down the hallways, their feet making light clicks along the bone white tile.

"You know, I never understood why people needed to live in such large mansions," Harry commented after Susan got finished showing Harry one of the five lounges used for informal gatherings. "I remember reading about how some of the wings of a manor were at one point used to house whole families when political gatherings took place, but there doesn't seem to be much of a need for that these days."

"I think it goes back to the days when pureblood families were trying to impress people with their wealth," Susan murmured. When Harry tilted his head, she flushed, then continued. "A lot of the older families like to have larger houses to show off how rich they are."

"That sounds like something the Malfoys would do," Harry commented offhandedly, causing Susan to smile a bit.

"It does, doesn't it?"

As the two continued the tour, they were eventually stopped when a tiny creature popped up in front of them. It was a very small thing, no more than three feet tall, with spindly arms and legs, which made a stark contrast to its overly large head that contained a large pair of eyes and a long, pointed nose. Pointed, bat-like ears sat on its head, flapping every so often. Harry recognized the creature as a house elf from one of the books he had read.

The house elf was not wearing what could be considered traditional clothing in any way. Instead it was wearing a tea towel, bone white in color and with the Bones Coat of Arms on the left breast.

"Misses Susy, Madam Bones is awaiting you and Mister Potters in the dining hall," the house elf informed the young red haired heiress in a squeaky voice.

"Ok. Thank you, Penny," Susan said as the house elf squeaked an acknowledgment before disappearing with a sharp crack of displaced air. Susan looked over at Harry. "Come on, we'd better head back to the dining hall."

The dining hall, as Susan had called it, was a surprisingly small and informal dining room with a rectangular table that could seat up to eight

people and plush looking chairs with yellow and black padding. Both the table and chairs continued the scheme of looking like they had been carved from bones that made up the Bones Manor.

Amelia Bones was already seated at the head of the table, the position where the Head of House was supposed to sit.

"Aunty," Susan said as she moved over to sit on the right side of her aunt, and at a gesture from the stern looking, monocle wearing woman, Harry sat right next to his red haired friend.

"Did you enjoy the tour?" Madam Bones asked of Harry after they had all been seated.

"I did," Harry said with a pleasant smile. "This is a very nice manor, very ostentatious. Though," he gazed around the room, noting the polished marble and Corinthian columns. "I'm kind of surprised you are willing to live in such an extensive and likely costly place. You don't really strike me as the type to enjoy showing off such opulence."

The Head of the DMLE smiled.

"You're right. I don't," she leaned back in her chair. "I actually used to live in a small cottage that got destroyed during the war. When Susan's parents were... lost to us and I ended up taking the mantle for the House of Bones, I started living here. It's not only tradition for all Head of Houses' to do so, Bones Manor is one of the most secure locations within wizarding Britain; third only to Hogwarts and Gringotts."

Harry nodded and, out of the corner of his eyes, noticed that Susan was gripping the arm rest of her chair tightly. A look at her face showed that she was distressed, her nose and brow scrunched up as she forced tears back from her eyes.

Realizing that it was probably hearing about how her parents had been killed that was bothering her, Harry reached out and placed a hand over hers. The action served to make Susan relax. She looked down at the hand, then over to Harry, before looking back at the hand. After a moment, she smiled and carefully turned her hand over so she could squeeze his in thanks, before allowing Harry his hand back.

Amelia saw the exchange, but didn't say anything. Harry wondered if he had stepped over his bounds, but since she wasn't speaking or looking at him disapprovingly figured she was just observing the moment.

"I have read that the Ancient and Most Noble House of Bones were well known for their wards and defensive enchantments," Harry said as he placed his hand back on his own armrest.

"We are," Amelia informed him, then grimaced. "Or were. I was never that good with warding, though I am talented at defense. It's the reason I was able to become Head Auror during the war. However, with Susan and I as the last of our house, I am afraid warding might become a thing of the past for our family."

That was a sobering thought, and one that he did not like to think. The loss of knowledge always bothered Harry. While he was not like a Ravenclaw, seeking knowledge for knowledge's sake, he loved learning and finding practical uses for what he learned. The idea that knowledge that he could have probably used at some point may be lost to the ages was depressing.

"I wanted to thank you, Harry," Amelia said, changing the subject smoothly before the silence that had descended upon the room could get awkward.

Harry blinked.

"For what?"

"My niece has told me of how you helped her in her classes and with her homework. In all of the letters I received from Susan during the year, most of them were on how helpful you were."

"A-Aunty!" Susan gasped, her face flushing red in embarrassment. She looked like she wanted to sink into her chair.

Harry looked over at Susan, who noticed his gaze and quickly diverted her own. He almost chuckled. This girl was even worse than Lisa when she was embarrassed.

"I may have given some help, but you did all the work," Harry told her. His words merely made her blush more. "Even if I hadn't given aid, you would have been fine."

"Maybe with my Transfiguration," Susan admitted as she did her best to get over her bashfulness. "But my Charms work isn't that good. I don't think I would have done a very good job if you hadn't helped me with those spells."

"Maybe, maybe not," Harry shrugged. "Personally, I think you would have excelled whether I was around or not."

Before Susan could try to refute his words, food began appearing on the table. Harry looked over at the food with interest. Most of it was what someone would expect to find at your average, English meal; Roast Lamb, boiled vegetables, baked potatoes, bread, and all of it bathed in gravy. It was nowhere near as healthy as the foods Harry liked to eat, but he did not want to be a rude guest so he made do.

Small talk was made during dinner, mostly between Harry and Madam Bones. Susan for some reason remained very quiet, only speaking when Harry asked her a question or tried to bring her into the conversation.

Harry didn't know why, but his friend seemed to be more interested in listening to the conversation between himself and her aunt than she did actually partaking. It wasn't all that unusual, as Susan was very shy. But several times he had caught her staring at him with a strange look on her face that did not match the normally kind, if a bit bashful, girl at all.

"This was an excellent meal," Harry replied, speaking only half honestly. It had tasted good, even he would not deny that. But he wished people would eat a little healthier.

"I'll be sure to pass on that compliment to our house elf," Madam Bones said, standing up. "Now why don't we adjourn to my study?"

Realizing that they were finally getting to the heart of the matter as to why he was here, Harry and Susan both stood up and pushed their chairs back. They followed Madam Bones as she led them down one of the many hallways and into her private study.

Amelia Bones' private study was a very apt reflection on said woman's personality. It was very spartan, almost bare. While the walls were made of the same bone white color scheme, as was the floor and ceiling, there was very little in the way of amenities. Harry could see a large desk in front of a book case containing scrolls of some kind, two chairs in front of the desk, and a low-standing table in the center of the room that had two couches on either side of it. There were very few pictures or anything on the walls to indicate the room was even used, just four magical photos of Madam Bones, Susan, and Susan's parents located on the desk.

As Harry surveyed his new surroundings, his attention was inexplicably drawn to what looked like a shallow stone basin sitting on the table in the center of the room. He had never seen anything quite like it before. It could have almost been mistaken for an ancient bowl used by nomadic tribes before the age of iron came about. However, Harry could tell almost immediately that it was not something so basic as that.

Runes. Several runes were carved into it's side. They moved in what looked like a never ending chain of patterns around the object.

Harry recognized the runes, they were Nordic, though their meaning was lost on him. If he were to run a literal translation of the runes, it would be along the lines of 'Unveiling the third eye of the inner mind to those who would seek the council of others'. It was a very rough translation, and not entirely accurate, but that was the gist of what the runes said when combined.

Perhaps even stranger than the runes themselves was the liquid inside of the stone basin. It did not look like liquid at all. In fact, if Harry did not know any better, he would almost believe that the swirling mass of silvery liquid was some kind of gas. The liquid had an almost cloud-like quality to it that made him think of vapors that could be found when burning incense.

At a gesture from Madam Bones, Harry and Susan sat down on one of the couches while the department head took a seat across from them. Once the two were comfortable, she then gestured towards the bowl. "Do you know what this is?"

"No," Harry shook his head as Susan remained silent. "I can't say I've ever seen anything like it before either." Much as he did not like to admit to containing a lack of knowledge, he was smart enough not to downplay his shortcomings. He knew there was a lot about the wizarding world he still had yet to learn, knowledge he did not possess, items and objects that he did not know existed. This was likely just one instance of many.

"This is what's called a Pensieve," Madam Bones began to explain. "It's an object that is used to review memories."

"I see," Harry immediately caught on to where this was going. "And you want to see the memory of my confrontation with Voldemort."

"Yes."

Harry nodded. That would actually make this situation much easier. Harry had been wondering how he would be able to properly convey the danger Voldemort possessed with words alone. If she actually saw for herself what happened rather than have him try to explain it she may come to realize the threat the man poses better than if he were to simply tell her his tale.

It would also help validate what happened to him. Right now, all Madam Bones had to go on was his words on what happened via Susan. And while Harry was sure she trusted her niece, the potential of the dark lords return to the living was something that would bring terror to the world of magic at just the thought. How could she possibly believe him if he didn't have any proof other than his words?

"Very well," he said after a few seconds of thought. His eyes focused once more on Madam Bones. "How would we go about showing my memory of the event in this Pensieve?"

At his words, Madam Bones stood up and made her way over to him. Harry and Susan both watched as she knelt down, wand in hand.

"What I am going to do is place my wand at your temple. I want you to focus on the events you wish to show in as much detail as you can. I will then be able to extract the memory, place it in a pensieve, and then watch it."

"Sounds simple enough," Harry quickly conjured up the memory of his confrontation with Voldemort from the moment he entered the chamber with the stone to the moment Voldemort tried to possess him. "I'm ready."

"Then let's proceed," Amelia said, placing her wand at his temple.

Extracting a memory was a most unusual experience. It was very hard to describe the sensation he felt as it was taken from him. It literally felt like the memory was being pulled directly from his brain and into Amelia's wand, and when the memory was fully extracted, Harry could not even recall the memory from his mind.

Now that was disconcerting. While there were many memories that Harry possessed that he sometimes wished he could forget, those memories and the experience he had gained from them were a large part of what made him who he was. He would not exchange or erase them for the world.

"I hope that when you finish viewing my memory, you'll return it to me," Harry said to the monocle wearing female as she placed the silvery whisp-like memory inside of the Pensieve. He did not like the idea of not being able to remember something he knew happened to him. It was far from pleasant.

"Don't worry," Madam Bones told him in a slightly placating tone. "Once I finish viewing the memory, I will give it back to you."

A sigh of relief escaped Harry's lips as he watched Madam Bones put a finger into the Pensieve. It was interesting to watch. There was no major change. It wasn't like the monocle wearing woman was suddenly sucked into the liquid. However, the way her eyes glazed over and began rapidly fluttering back and forth, as if she were watching something only she could see, was very telling.

Figuring it would take a while for Madam Bones to review his memories in their entirety, Harry turned his body slightly so that he was partially facing Susan.

"Are you alright, Sue?" he asked, the question seeming random and startling the young girl he was questioning. "I noticed during dinner that

you were rather quiet... well, quieter than usual that is."

"It's... It's nothing," Susan said softly as she looked down at her hands on her lap. The action caused Harry to frown. It was one of her tells that he had discovered a while ago. Whenever Susan was embarrassed or wanted to speak but was afraid to, she would look away from the person she was talking to, often looking down.

"Susan," he said again, getting her attention. "We're friends, right?"

"Ah... O-Of course," Susan stuttered, both startled and embarrassed by the sudden topic change.

"And you know that as your friend you can tell me anything, right?" Harry continued, disguising his frown well. He was still getting used to all his friends quirks and how to properly get them to open up to him. It was difficult because he was so used to Lisa, who usually only required a hug to get her talking. Unfortunately, he didn't think hugging Susan would work like it did with Lisa. "I'm not going to make fun of you, or laugh at you. I..." Harry paused. It was for barely a second, but it was there. "I want to help."

Susan looked at him, her eyes taking on a strange quality. They weren't quite piercing. Nothing like his own eyes could be. It was more like they had become more perceptive of their surroundings. A strange change from their normally nervous look to be sure.

"I... I guess I'm just... envious of you," Susan finally admitted quietly, her shoulders slumping as if she were ashamed of herself.

"Envious of me?" Harry knew there were a number of people who were jealous of him. If not for his status as the Boy-Who-Lived or his top grades than for his wealth and title as heir to the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter. Envy and jealousy were something he lived with every day.

Still, he had not expected Susan, sweet, shy Susan of all people to be jealous of him.

"Why?"

"Because of how easy everything is for you," Susan said, still not looking at him. "Even now, I watch you sitting around and talking with my aunty like it was an every day occurrence, like she isn't one of the most powerful women in Magical Britain. It's just..."

"Frustrating?" Harry offered as Susan trailed off. The red head gave him a nod.

"Yes."

"I think I understand," Harry said slowly as he tried to place himself in Susan's shoes. It was hard because he did not have any experience with what she was feeling. "Your Aunt casts a very big shadow, doesn't she? And you're trying to live up to the expectations people have of you for being her niece, but you're afraid you'll fail. And then you meet me, and I just sort of came in out of nowhere and took center stage, as it were. Is that about right?"

"It's not just that," Susan finally looked at him, and for the first time, he could see how frustrated she was. "It's that you always seem so... so perfect. You're always the first to get a spell right in class, the first to finish your homework, then you help all of *us* finish *our* homework. You made the Quidditch team in your first year and bought all of the teams new brooms. And now, here you are, talking to my aunt, who just so happens to be one the most powerful woman in the Ministry of Magic like an equal! I just sort of wish that I could be like you... maybe if I was..."

"You'd be able to live up to your aunt's reputation," Harry finished. Susan nodded meekly, the surprising rant having taken a lot out of her. She seemed to have almost collapsed into herself now that she had expended all that energy in expressing how she felt.

Harry watched the girl for a moment as he tried to figure out what he could say to help her. He was ashamed to admit this, but he had never actually thought about how his friends might take his abilities and talents. And now that he knew how Susan felt when she saw him performing magic in class or helping them with their homework, he couldn't help but wonder if his other friends might feel the same way.

Did they feel stymied by his seemingly remarkable feats and intelligence?

Were they feeling inadequate?

And if they were, what should he do about it?

If there was one thing Harry was sure of, it was that he couldn't just lower his own skills to make them feel better. Now that the gauntlet had been set, even if he were to do such a thing it wouldn't matter. His more perceptive friends would know and realize he wasn't trying as hard so they would not feel inadequate, which would make them angry because they would know what he was doing and likely assume it was out of pity.

At the same time, Harry didn't want them to feel like they were beneath him, in skills or in intellect. The whole purpose of surrounding himself with his friends was so he would have people he could, if not relate to, than at least have some semblance of normalcy with.

At least, as normal as it can get when you're going to a school for Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Maybe he should find some other way to help them instead of just giving them the answers they sought? Like some kind of reverse psychology where he gave them the necessary tools to discover the answers to their questions themselves, but didn't outright tell them what they wanted to know. It sounded promising, and may actually help them grow more than if he were to just give them all the answers they sought on a silver platter. Nothing breeds growth like conflict.

Looking at Susan as she began to fidget anxiously, Harry realized that he really needed to say something. He didn't know what he was going to say, or even what he should say, but he definitely needed to come up with something that would help his friend.

"You know, a lot of people only think I'm perfect because that's what they want to see," as Susan stopped fidgeting to look at him, Harry bit his lip. He had absolutely no clue where he was going with this. "You know how I'm the Boy-Who-Lived, right?" Susan gave him a hesitant nod, clearly confused but willing to go along with him. "And you've probably read a lot of those stories about me, yes? Like the ones where I'm traveling around the world with my master, learning the ways of magic and fighting trolls and dragons as a past time?" Another nod. "When you first realized I was

coming to Hogwarts, did you expect me to be like the Harry you read in those books? Am I anything like the Harry Potter you read about in those stories?"

"Well, yes," Susan answered, flushing a bit as she seemed to realize that she had already created an expectation of what Harry should be like before they had even met. "But to be honest, you kind of are like the Harry in those stories." When he raised an eyebrow, she flushed some more and began to fidget. "I mean, I always expected you to be kind and brave, which you are, and very smart and powerful," she gave him a slightly pointed look. Pointed for Susan at least. "Which you are. And you're talented at magic, just like the Harry in those stories."

Harry nodded.

"All true, but do you know why I am the way I am?" When Susan shook her head, Harry answered his own question. "Perception. When I first realized how famous I was, I realized that people had certain expectations about me; what I would look like, how I would act, my power, my intellect, everything. They all had this image in their heads about me being this all powerful, all knowing, omnipotent wizard capable of defeating dark lords like it was going out of style. This was what they wanted to see, so that's what I gave them."

"What you gave them?" Susan frowned, her expression turning quizzical.

"Yes," Harry nodded. "What I gave them. They wanted to see a wizard who was wise, and powerful, and all knowing. So that entire summer before starting Hogwarts, I buckled down and began studying. I learned as much as I could about Hogwarts, and magic, and even found someone who could help me better integrate myself into wizarding society. I worked hard so that when I finally arrived at Hogwarts, people would see exactly what they had come to expect of me."

"Remember this, Susan. The way people perceive you to be is the basis for their reality. They look at you, and they have this image of how you should act, what your personality should be, how powerful you are. In many cases, it doesn't even matter whether or not you are like they believe you should be. The reality of an individual is not defined by the

true reality of the world around them, but by their own perceptions of what they deem real."

"For example, you are the niece of Amelia Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. I bet people expect you to be this amazing woman who is calm in the face of danger and believes wholly in the law. Who is stern, yet fair, and who believes in the laws put in place are their to protect our society. They most likely expect you to follow in your aunt's footsteps, becoming a top class auror and climbing to the top to become head auror if not the head of the entire DMLE." He paused for a moment, taking that time to look at Susan's wide eyes. "Am I right?"

"Yes..." Susan breathed, her voice laced with shock. "Yes, you're exactly right. Everyone thinks I'm going to be just like my aunty. Every time I've ever met with aunty's friends they always say things like 'oh, you look just like Amelia when she was your age' or 'I bet you'll be just like your aunt when you get older'. It drives me insane!"

"I'll bet," Harry nodded sagely, masking his relief at being right. "This is exactly how it is for me. People expect me to be a certain way because I am the 'Boy-Who-Lived'." He put quotation marks in the air when he spoke his moniker, as well as gave a slight snort of derision.

"How do you deal with it?" Susan asked lowly.

"By striving to break out of my own shadow," Harry locked gazes with Susan, passion burning in his eyes. "By proving to everyone that I am more than just the stories they've been told. That I am more than just the Boy-Who-Live. When people look at me, I don't want them to say 'look! It's the Boy-Who-Live!'. No, I want them to say 'look! It's Harry Potter!'. So I try to be the best I can be so that when people look at me, it's my name they are thinking of and not that silly moniker I was given before I was even out of my nappies."

Susan giggled, causing Harry to crack a small grin of his own. He was glad to have at least gotten her to feel good enough to giggle. Yet even as he thought this, the red head's laughter eventually died off as her cheerful expression was replaced by a pensive one.

"I don't think I can do that," she admitted, her left hand coming up to rub her right arm. "I'm not like you. I'm not brave, or strong, or smart, or anything like that."

"I think you might be selling yourself short," Harry hesitated for only a moment before grabbing her hand like he had done during dinner. The action forced Susan to look at him, as well as gain a light dusting of pink on her cheeks. "You might not be smart like a Ravenclaw, or brave like a Gryffindor. And you may not have the cunning of a Slytherin, but you know what? None of those traits are actually needed to achieve greatness."

They certainly helped, as Harry could attest to. But just because they helped did not necessarily they were needed to achieve greatness.

"The only thing a person needs to become great is hard work. The ability to put all of your effort into accomplishing your goals. Intelligence can be acquired through learning, bravery achieved by facing down the things you fear, cunning can be learned through experience, but hard work is something that can only be acquired naturally, or through the experience of many failures."

"A lot of people degrade the Hufflepuff house, believing it to be the house of left overs. But you know what, they're wrong. Hufflepuff is the house of hard work. They are the ones who understand that by putting their all into everything they do, they too can achieve greatness."

By this point, Harry knew he had Susan's complete, undivided attention. She was staring at him in rapture.

"Just take your aunt for example. Wasn't she in Hufflepuff? Now look at her. She is the only female in the history of the Ministry of Magic to become the head of the DMLE, and the second female to ever hold a high post in office. And she didn't get there through cunning and ambition, but through hard work and gumption."

"Harry..." Susan breathed, her voice barely a whisper.

"And you can become just as great as your aunt," Harry continued. By this point in time, he had actually worked himself into a bit of a frenzy.

Adrenaline was pumping through his veins almost like when he was sparring. He could feel the blood pounding in his ears as he let his passion for this subject get the best of him. "It doesn't even have to be in her field like everyone expects you to be. There are many ways to serve your country than protecting them from dark wizards. You could become a healer, or a teacher, or any other number of important careers. The only thing limiting you is this," Harry finished by poking Susan's forehead.

"Wise words."

Harry froze at the same time Susan did as someone who was not either of them spoke up. Slowly, the two turned around to see Madam Bones, who looked like she had just finished reviewing Harry's memory and was now looking at Harry with a very contemplative and... appreciative expression on her face.

"I don't think I've ever met someone who was so intelligent at such a young age," Madam Bones continued, her lips quirking upwards in a semi-smile.

"Ah... um..." for perhaps the first time in a good while, Harry found himself well and truly embarrassed. It was not the kind of mortification he felt when dealing with Katrina's teasing, or something equally bothersome. No, this was the kind of embarrassment that came from having someone listening in on a conversation you were having with someone else that you got so caught up in you didn't even realize said other person was listening. That the conversation just so happened to be giving a pep talk to Susan Bones, and the one listening in was her aunt only made him that much more flustered. "T-Thank you."

Madam Bones offered the boy a slight smile, before addressing her niece. "Susan, I suggest you listen to this boy's advice. You will go very far if you do."

"Yes, aunty," Susan replied dutifully. She was not embarrassed like Harry was, a surprising change of events. Then again, she knew the woman before them much better than Harry ever would. She was probably used to Madam Bones' antics.

"I take it you reviewed the memory?" asked Harry, coughing into his hand

in order to get back on track. He wanted to forget this particular moment of weakness, even if he would never actually be able to forget it. At the very least he wanted to move this along so he could reign in his chagrin.

"I did," Madam Bones leaned back in her chair and frowned. "And I am very... disturbed with what I saw." She shook her head, a look of incredulity crossing over her face. "To think that the Dark Lord really is still alive and was at Hogwarts, and riding on the back of a professors head like some kind of parasite to boot."

"It's probably how he was able to get passed the wards," Harry rubbed his chin. "By masking his magical signature with another magical signature, he was able to remain hidden from the wards and protections surrounding Hogwarts. There is also the fact that right now Voldemort is extremely weak. At the moment he's nothing but a wraith, a shadow of his former self. Physically speaking, he is powerless unless he's leaching off someone else. And even then, because he's practically sucking all the magic out of the person he's possessing, that person also becomes significantly weaker than he or she normally would be."

"Which would explain why you were able to match him during your fight," Madam Bones nodded approvingly at the young boy. "Nice fight by the way. Your idea of getting up close was good. Very few wizards actually know how to fight without a wand. Take it away and they're useless."

Madam Bones paused for a moment to adjust her monocle.

"What I want to know is, what was the Philosopher's Stone doing there in the first place?"

"I couldn't tell you," Harry shrugged helplessly. "I only discovered the stones existence through carefully crafted research and observation. And it's not like I could look into the mind of Nicolas Flamel and Dumbledore to see what they were thinking when they decided to bring the Philosopher's Stone to Hogwarts. Besides, what's done is done. The stone won't be bothering anyone now." He fixed Madam Bones with a look. "I think the real question we should be asking is what should we do about the dark lord?"

"Yes, that is the question, isn't it?" Madam Bones spoke rhetorically

before falling silent. "I would like to inform Minister Fudge about this event," Harry bit his lip when she said this to keep from disputing her, "but because Minister Fudge is in Lucius Malfoy's back pocket, I don't think it would do any good."

"It would also incite panic even if Minister Fudge were inclined to believe you, which I doubt he would be," Harry added. "Even now, nearly twelve years after his defeat, people still fear Voldemort to the point where they can't even say his name. If you went and told Minister Fudge about Voldemort still being alive and trying to find a body again, he would probably do everything in his power to discredit you."

"That's very insightful thinking," Madam Bones complimented. "And very true." She placed her hands on the table, gazing at Harry with a curious look. "What do you think should be done in this situation then?"

Harry frowned, wondering for a moment why this woman was asking his opinion when she likely had much more experience than he did. Was she truly curious about his thoughts? Was she testing him?

Those thoughts didn't last long. He dispelled each of them with a subtle shake of the head and focused on the woman before him.

"I would keep this information to myself while preparing what I can in secret," Harry paused, tilting his head in thought for a moment. "Is there anyone within the Ministry of Magic that you would trust to not let this information slip?"

"There's Alastor Moody, though he's retired from auror work," Madam Bones said. "But he's friends with Albus Dumbledore, so chances are good that he already knows. I do know of another person who may be able to help us. He's an Unspeakable, but I am not sure if I trust him with this information."

"Then it would be best not to tell him," Harry said. "If you're not one hundred percent sure they can be entrusted with this information, it would be best to keep them ignorant." A frown marred Harry's face. It would be hard to come up with a plan if it was just the two of them. They would need more allies.

"I'll see what I can do about gaining potential allies," Harry started. "In the meantime, it may be prudent to try and convince Minister Fudge to increase the funding for the auror corps. As I understand it, ever since he was elected as Minister, the funds for the DMLE have been cut down to a third of what they once were."

"You would be right," Madam Bones grimaced. "Under the suggestion of Lucius Malfoy, Fudge has been cutting funds to the DMLE using the pretense that since the war is over, there is no longer any need for such a large task force."

Harry's lips thinned a bit. Even during a time when there wasn't a war going on, a force like the aurors was still very much needed. From Harry's understanding the auror forces acted as a double for both army and police. Without a large task force capable of policing the entirety of Britain, it left the country vulnerable towards everything from your pick pockets to murderers. And that was saying nothing about having them to protect England against a potential invasion from another country.

"Do you think Lucius Malfoy knows You-Know-Who is alive?"

Blinking at almost the same time, Harry and Madam Bones turned their heads to look at Susan, who let out a slight 'eep!' at suddenly finding herself the center of attention.

"That is a very good question," Harry smiled while Madam Bones looked at her niece in pride. Susan flushed at the praise. "But to answer it, no, I don't think Malfoy knows about Voldemort's continued existence. If he did, the dark lord would have been resurrected by now. All Lucius would have needed to do was inform Fudge of the Stone being placed at Hogwarts and '*convince*' him that it was not safe to keep the Stone in a school full of children. After that it would only be a matter of getting his hands on the Stone for his master and giving it to him."

"Harry's right," Madam Bones added thoughtfully. "Secrecy is currently the Dark Lord's best weapon right now. That means he has to remain in hiding from everybody, including his followers. At least until he gains enough strength to let everyone know he's still alive, especially since some of his followers may not like to know he's still around. Lucius

Malfoy has always been a man who does what's best for Lucius Malfoy, and as much he may deny it to the Dark Lord if he were asked, he has enjoyed living a life of supreme luxury since his master's demise."

"How hard do you think it will be to increase the DMLE's funding in order to expand the auror forces?" asked Harry, causing Madam Bones to grimace.

"Very," the interim head of the Bones family sighed. "The problem is Lucius Malfoy currently has all the cards. He's either bribed or blackmailed most of the Ministry into his pocket. Just about everyone owes him something, which is why he managed to get so powerful despite not being from the wealthier of families like the Zabini's or the Ashfords. The only people he can't bribe or blackmail are the light families, and they're firmly in Dumbledore's pocket."

"Dmbledore hates violence," Madam Bones continued. "I can't rightly blame him for that. He fought in two wars against two separate Dark Lords. But those wars gave him an aversion to violence and fighting. I doubt he would be willing to have his people help us try to increase funding in order to prepare for war."

"And so we're back to square one," Harry sighed, his thoughts turning to his headmaster. He was not sure what to think about the man. On the one hand, he had placed the Philosopher's Stone in a school with children. On the other, he was very powerful and no one could deny he was wise. Would a man like him really not help them increase funding for their auror corps in order to protect Britain from Voldemort?

"What about the neutral faction?" asked Susan, speaking up once again. Harry and Madam Bones glanced over at her, causing the red head's face to turn as red as her hair, but she still pressed onwards. "They're not working for either side, right? Couldn't you get them to help?"

"We could," Madam Bones said at a questioning glance from Harry. "However, convincing them to band together is an issue in and of itself. The problem with the neutral families, aside from the fact that they like to stay out of most political affairs that don't adversely affect them, is that they're very divided. The neutrals have a number of separate factions

within themselves, and none of those factions are very fond of each other. This makes it hard for them to agree on anything, which is why they've never had much power within the Wizengamot, despite making up nearly sixty-five percent of the governing body."

"But if we could get them on our side it would prove incredibly beneficial," Harry rubbed his chin for a moment, then cast a smile at Susan. "That's a very good idea, Sue."

Susan flushed.

"You're welcome," she mumbled demurely, her head turning downwards so that her hair hid her red face. Despite her embarrassment, she had a small smile on her face at being able to help her friend and aunty in a way they apparently had not thought of.

XoX

Harry nearly cried in sweet relief as the movie Lisa had somehow convinced him to watch finally ended. How his friend managed to cajole him into watching it with her was beyond him. Never again would he allow her to dictate the terms of the movie they were watching. Harry wasn't even sure how Lisa had convinced her mother to let her watch the movie.

Scratch that. He was pretty sure Lisa had not even informed her mother of what they would be watching before Misses Crawft left to run some errands.

Harry was beginning to regret letting Lisa get her way.

He could only imagine what Mister Crawft would have done had he seen what they watching.

"Nggyah!" Lisa let out a strange combination between a grunt and a yawn as she stretched her arms over her head from her position on the couch. She was laying down, her head plopped unceremoniously on his lap after she had decided he made the perfect pillow. His best friend smiled up at him through half lidded eyes. "That was a good movie."

"That was a horrible movie," Harry countered in a dry tone of voice.

"Wha –" Lisa's expression took on one of shock. "How could you think that? One from the Heart is one of the most impressive romance films of all time! It really shows how two people who are so different can find love with each other!"

"It's also rated 15 for a reason," Harry intoned with a slightly deadpanned expression, before his look turned curious. "And just where did you find that movie anyways? As far as I know, all the movies rated above 12 are locked up."

Lisa giggled, causing Harry to narrow his eyes.

"You know what, I don't want to know," Harry decided then and there that however his friend managed to get her hands on a movie neither of her parents would have let them watch was none of his business. "I really don't."

"Aw, don't be like that," Lisa grinned at him from her place on his lap, her eyes dancing with mirth. She looked like an imp, especially with the way her head was perpendicular to his, causing that smile of hers to look decidedly off. "Adult movies are above and beyond better than those kiddy movies anyways. My tastes have become so refined for those childish movies."

Harry gave the girl an indulgent smile as she tried to use a word that was more likely to come out of his mouth than hers.

"I'm sure. Now why don't you put that movie away before your mother or, heaven forbid, your father comes home and discovers it."

"Fine," Lisa huffed as she reluctantly got up from the couch and made her way over to the VCR.

Harry watched her as she made her way out of the room and towards the closet where Lisa's mother stored all of the higher rated movies.

As the 'thump, thump' noises from Lisa's feet hitting the wood tiling began getting louder, Harry went over to the VCR and put in a movie he wanted

to watch.

"What's this?" asked Lisa as she walked back into the living room just as Harry sat back down. Her eyes were glued to the tele as the scene opened to show a high tech city filled with pollution and what looked like strange chimneys belching fire.

"Blade Runner," Harry answered as Lisa sat herself down. The girl quickly scooted into his side so she could use his shoulder as a pillow. Harry allowed her to, and even slid an arm around her shoulder as an instinctual reaction.

"Now who's having us watch movies we're too young for?" Lisa teased her friend as they got comfortable to watch the movie. Harry grunted, but didn't answer as Lisa's expression turned quizzical. "And just where did you get this movie anyways?"

He had actually gotten the movie by using his magic to confuse a salesman into thinking he was fifteen. Not that he was going to tell her that.

"Magic," Harry answered with a sardonic chuckle. Lisa huffed.

"You know, if you didn't want to tell me you could have just said so," she mumbled, before growing silent to watch the movie. They would remain like this until Misses Crawft came home with a trunk full of groceries.

XoX

Harry arrived home a little later than he usually did. Since it was Saturday, he had decided it would be fine if he stayed over for dinner at Lisa's. He had no chores that day, and he doubted either of his relatives would complain about him not being there.

And he was right. Petunia and Vernon hardly even paid attention to him when he came in through the door aside from a quick glance out of the corner of their eyes. In fact, Harry would say they were deliberately ignoring him in an attempt to pretend he didn't exist.

They had been like this since the start of the summer. Harry assumed

they were nervous around him because he was learning how to do more magic. They were probably afraid he would be more inclined to start using his magic on them, or perhaps just the idea of being near his 'unnaturalness' was enough to make them keep their distance.

He honestly didn't know, and truthfully, he didn't care. If they wanted to ignore him, that was just fine with Harry. He had better things to do than indulge his relatives in any way, shape, or form.

As Harry made his way up to his room, the sound of his feet lighting thudding against the carpeted staircase was nearly overpowered by the sounds coming from the tele downstairs. Without pause, the young Potter heir swept down the hall and towards the door that marked his room.

Entering his room, Harry got what would soon be the first of many surprises that summer.

Sitting on the chair at his desk was a man. He was a very young looking man, probably somewhere in his mid twenties. His hair was blond, cut in a intermediate style that framed his face. He had a french nose set between two smiling blue eyes that spoke of amusement and mischief, and a strong jawline. The man was definitely of French descent, or at least came from the mainland, as Harry noted the distinct differences in facial features from normal British citizens.

His clothing consisted of an extravagant silver robe that was more resplendent than anything Harry had ever seen to date. It looked more expensive than all of the clothing he had combine. It also told him something about the man sitting on his chair.

This man was a wizard.

A wizard Harry had never met before in his life.

A wizard Harry had never met before in his life who just so happened to be sitting in his room like he owned the place.

He was also holding the Philosopher's Stone in his left hand, which was held up to his face as he examined the very powerful magical artifact, turning this way and that as he studied it.

Harry's mind jumbled together as panic raced through him. Who was this man? How did he find him? How did he find the Philosopher's Stone? How did he even know about the Stone? Was he a friend or foe? And the biggest question, could he take him if the man proved to be dangerous?

The man seemed to sense his emotions, or maybe saw something in his eyes, for his smile grew that much wider.

"Harry Potter," the man's eyes twinkled in a way that Dumbledore's never could. "My name is Nicolas Flamel, and I would like to thank you for keeping my Stone safe."

Harry blinked.

What?

I love you guys. Seriously, 170 reviews for this chapter. If this keeps up, I may actually reach my goal of having the same number of reviews as some of my favorite authors. Please keep it up.

This chapter is quite a bit longer than my previous two. In fact, I think you could combine my previous two chapters and get near enough to the amount of words in this chapter.

I hope you all enjoyed the chapter. I left you guys on a bit of a cliff hanger, though it should be obvious what's going on here if you read my story summary.

Be sure to let me know what you think. Loved it? Hate it? Think I need to get my head examined for putting this crap out? Be sure to let me know.

Also, please be sure to check out my new blog: The Thoughts and Wonderings of a Fanfiction Writer, which you will find the link to on my profile, where I will be answering all the questions you guys ask me in your reviews, provided it doesn't contain any spoilers, and where I will be posting thoughts and comments as well as update reports on my work.

Alchemy and an Unpleasant Surprise

Chapter 4: Alchemy and an Unpleasant Surprise

Life always takes interesting twists and turns, especially if your name is Harry Potter. Ever since the beginning of his life, when he first came out of that strange hollow tube that he would later learn was called a Uterus, Harry had an inkling that he was different.

This... was not an entirely accurate assessment (Harry may remember that far back, but he did not have mind developed enough to come up with such complex conclusions), but it got the point across. For as long as Harry could remember, which was a very long time considering he never forgot anything, he knew he was somehow different from everyone else. He could do things that shocked his parents, he could remember everything that had ever happened to him and the things he saw in his presence, magic came to him as easily as breathing, and things that would have never happened to someone else, happened to him.

Things like becoming the sudden apprentice of Nicolas Flamel, the famed alchemist who became world renown for his creation of the Philosopher's Stone.

"Alchemy is the ancient metaphysical science and mystical art of manipulating and altering matter using magic," Nicolas Flamel lectured as he paced back and forth in front of his newest pupil. And the first one he'd had since Albus Dumbledore. "Unlike Transfiguration, Alchemy is a permanent art. When you Transfigure something, the object only stays in it's transfigured state until the magic you have put into the object runs out. With Alchemy, any object whose structured you've altered will stay that way until you decide to alter it again. In this way, Alchemy is much more valuable than your standard magics."

When Harry had come home to find Nicolas Flamel sitting in his room, he had been shocked, a natural occurrence considering he had not expected anyone from the magical world to even find out where he lived. How had Flamel found him? How had he gotten past that strange energy

field that had surrounded his house? Harry had asked Flamel these questions, but only got a frustrating answer in return: *"That is for me to know, and you to discover on your own."*

"The act of Manipulaing and altering matter is known as Transmutation."

Not the most forthcoming answer. Then again, it was just sort of answer he would expect from someone who was over six hundred years old. Anyone who had lived that long would become extremely eccentric. Harry was only eleven years old and a lot of people often told him he was eccentric. Apparently it was the mark of a genius... and old age. Flamel's eccentricity was probably tenfold because he was both a genius *and* old.

The man was ancient!

Oblivious to the thoughts of his apprentice, Nicolas Flamel continued his lecture on what had to be one of the most interesting subjects Harry had ever heard.

"There are three sequences that are very important when it comes to understanding how the act of transmutation works."

Flamel held one near his face. It was clenched into a fist until his index finger stuck into the air, pointing up and signifying his first point.

"Comprehension: Understanding the inherent structure and properties of the atomic or molecular makeup of a particular material to be transmuted, including the flow and balance of potential and kinetic energy within."

A second finger came up.

"Deconstruction: Using magic to break down the physical structure of the identified material into a more malleable state so as to be easily reshaped into a new form."

A third finger.

"And finally, Reconstruction: Continuing the flow of magic so as to reform the material into a new shape."

Wanting to make an impression on his young apprentice, Flamel stopped walking and turned to face the Potter heir. He clapped his hands once, then knelt down and pressed both hands against the ground.

A light blue line of arcane energies erupted around Flamel, surrounding him in a hazy field of light rays that blurred his image. Harry felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end as the magic in the surrounding air became supercharged. It felt almost like he was receiving the indirect feedback from someone else sticking their hands into a wire socket.

Garlands of magic arced around the center where Flamel's left hand was placed. Harry watched, his mouth beginning to drop as he saw the area where his new teacher had placed his hand began to crumble away.

No. not crumble away. It was beginning to form something new.

The stone floor around Flamel's hand was actually changing. It's entire structure formed into strange looking particles that were eerily reminiscent of sand. The stone sand, for lack of a better term, was all crawling towards the center above Flamel's hand, where it began forming something. The tip of an object, a cylindrical pommel, Harry realized.

More and more of the object soon became visible. It was definitely some kind of staff. The object was still being pulled out, it was already a good five feet long, yet all that was visible so far was the pole.

As the staff grew longer and longer, the crater around Flamel continued to grow larger. By the time the transmutation was finished, the crater surrounding the Alchemist was a perfect circle with a radius of exactly five feet. The stone flooring looked like it had been crumbling away and moving inwards towards the center of the crater.

As the staff Flamel was creating was finished, Harry came to the realization that the object was no staff.

It was a glaive. A European polearm weapon that consisted of a single edged blade on one end of the pole. Made out of the same gray colored granite as the floor beneath their feet, the glaive stood at exactly two meters in height.

Running along the glaive's shaft were intricate looking designs that reminded Harry of some of the small architectural carvings found running along the tops of Roman Columns. The blade itself was affixed to the pole using a socket-shaft configuration instead of having a tang like a blade or naginata, the Japanese equivalent to the glaive.

This particular blade shape sort of reminded Harry of a Dao, a Chinese sword mainly used for slashing and chopping. The edge had a moderate curve, before that curved steepened as it reached the end. Meanwhile, the back was perfectly straight, until it reached about a third away from the point, after which it made a round, ninety degree turn, then returned to a flat edge that reached the point where it met the blade. The only difference between a Dao and this sword, aside from the pole it was attached to, was the sharp, nasty looking hook on the back of the blade that Harry knew was for better catching horse riders.

Nicolas grabbed the shaft of the glaive in both hands and spun the weapon around expertly, showing that he actually knew how to use this polearm. And as he did, there was a grin of mild amusement on his face as he looked at Harry's jaw dropping expression.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Harry could do nothing more than give a dumb nod. "The proper application for this particular craft requires not only a full understanding of chemistry and ancient alchemical theory, but also an innate talent towards recognizing and manipulating the physical objects with magic, which requires uncommon levels of intelligence and aptitude. This is why so few ever learn more than the basic theories behind alchemy, and why there are so few alchemists in the world today."

"Is Dumbledore an alchemist?" asked Harry, allowing his curiosity to get the better of him as a means of drawing his mind away from his shock at seeing alchemy up close. Truly, this had to be one of the most incredible aspects of magic around. Just think of the possibilities!

"Yes and no," Nicolas twirled the glaive before setting it down pommel first on the stone floor and tapping it a few times as he grew contemplative. "Dumbledore certainly has the brains for it, but he never really had the drive to become a great alchemist. At most, he knows the basics. Enough to get by, but not enough to become great."

"Now then, one of the things you should know about Alchemy is that it's more than just changing one object into another by deconstructing and reconstructing something at it's base components. Alchemy is as much of a science as it is magic. There are certain laws and limitations in which we are subject to, all of which fall under the concept of **Equivalent Exchange**."

"Humankind cannot gain anything without first giving something in return. To obtain, something of equal value must be lost," Harry recited dutifully. Flamel looked intrigued.

"So you know the laws of Equivalent Exchange?"

"Only the basics," Harry admitted. "That particular law is used in more than just alchemy. In a business you can't expect to make any money without putting an equal amount of time and effort into your business. In politics you can't convince people your idea is the best without expending an equal amount of time and effort to claw your way to the top. Currency is exchanged in order to pay for something of equal value. Gold is traded for an equal amount of silver. In some ways, you could say that the entire world is run based upon the concept of Equivalent Exchange."

"True. Very true," Flamel rubbed his chin thoughtfully as he looked at his young apprentice. "However, Equivalent Exchange is very different when it comes to alchemy. There are multiple ways to bend or break this law in worldly matters, but alchemy is another thing entirely."

"In standard practice, Equivalent Exchange can be broken down into two laws. The Law of Conservation of Mass, which states that energy and matter can neither be created from nothing nor destroyed to the point of elemental nonexistence. In other words, to create an object weighing one kilogram, at least one kilogram of material is necessary and destroying an object weighing one kilogram would reduce it to a set of parts, the sum of which would weigh one kilogram. And the Law of Natural Providence, which states that an object or material made of a particular substance or element can only be transmuted into another object with the same basic makeup and properties of that initial material. In other words, an object or material made mostly of water can only be transmuted into another object with the attributes of water."

"What happens when someone tries to bypass either of these two laws?" asked Harry. The more he heard about Alchemy the more interested he became in it. This branch of magic sounded like it was right up his alley. A combination of mysticism and science? How perfectly matched can you get?

"Since the alchemical forces being manipulated are not human in origin, but of the world as a whole, the consequences for attempting to bypass the Law of Equivalent Exchange in transmutation are not merely failure and cessation. When too much is attempted out of too little, what occurs is called a **Rebound**, in which the alchemical forces that are thrown out of balance on either side of the equation fluctuate wildly of their own accord in order to stabilize themselves - taking or giving more than was intended in often unpredictable and catastrophic ways such as accidental mutation, serious injury or death."

Harry found himself gulping as Nicolas Flamel gave him a stern look.

"That is why what you were doing with my Philosopher's Stone was so dangerous," the blond haired six hundred year old man said. "You were very lucky that the only ability you discovered was the one that created the Elixir of Life. Such knowledge might be more appealing to most people, but it is only a byproduct of the true power of the Stone."

"You mean it's ability to bypass the laws of Equivalent Exchange?" asked Harry. At hearing his answer, Flamel looked shocked, right before he began chuckling.

"I hadn't realized you knew what the Stone did."

"I didn't," Harry responded a tad dryly. "Not until this lecture, but I'm good at reading between the lines. By the Law of Natural Providence, it is impossible for silver or any other metal to be transmuted into gold because the chemical composition of gold is different from every other metal. Yet the Philosopher's Stone can do this, it can change any precious metal into gold, or so the legend goes. And if that is the case, then the very nature of the Stone is it's ability to allow the person using it to bypass the laws of Equivalent Exchange."

"Excellent!" Nicolas clapped his hands in a manner that was slightly

congratulatory and yet mocking at the same time. Harry would not admit how that kind of bothered him. It was like the man was a constant cynic. "I'm pleased to see my apprentice isn't an idiot. Perhaps you will be able to go far in this field, unlike Dumbledore who never really took the time to truly learn the subtle science of Alchemy."

"Albus Dumbledore always struck me as a more philosophical type than a scientist type," Harry said, shrugging. "Whenever I spoke with the man he was always making obscure mentions to philosophy and morality." He tilted his head. "I think the only time he ever gave me a straight up answer was when he told me about the magic he used to hide the Philosopher's Stone inside the Mirror of Erised."

"That's Dumbledore for you," Flamel nodded. "The man has always been a bit... off, even when he was nothing more than a young brat of eighty-two learning the ways of alchemy from myself. Such is often the mark of a genius. Even you have your odd little personality quirks, from what I have seen."

Harry shifted a bit uncomfortably in his seat. He disliked it when he had to admit to his own personality flaws, he did not want this man or anyone else pointing them out to him.

"Now then," Flamel clapped his hands together once. "I do believe we are done for today. Not bad for a first lesson, if I do say so myself. We've actually gone much further into my lecture than I thought we would. Now, off you go," the old alchemist made a shooing gesture with his left hand, "I must get this cleaned up before Penny comes home." He grimaced. "I do not want this crater to be here when she returns. That woman is a spit fire. You remember how to get to that room I showed you when you first came here?"

"Of course," Harry felt like huffing at the man questioning his ability to remember something. He didn't only because this man did not know he actually had eidetic memory, thus could not know that he remembered everything.

"And you remember how many turns you need?"

"One full rotation for every four hours," Harry recited dutifully. "Since only

two hours have passed, I only need to make a half turn."

"Good, I am pleased to know you can listen."

Harry's eye twitched a bit, unsure if he had just been complimented or insulted. It was very hard to tell with this man. Still, he managed to give his new teacher a respectful bow to show his appreciation of the knowledge he was being imparted. "Thank you for the lesson."

"Of course, of course." As Nicolas Flamel waved him off absently, eyes still focused on the ground beneath his feet. As he muttered something about not wanting to sleep on the couch, Harry made his way out of the room.

The Flamel Mansion was one of splendor and elegance, with it's sweeping hallways containing arched ceilings that were decorated various Renaissance style carvings, the gothic looking columns that lined the walls, and it's double-helix staircase. There were many paintings of various landscapes, non magical paintings that looked like original works of painters from the fifteenth and sixteenth century.

It was not very big, a three story mansion with a grand total of thirty-five rooms and a very large basement where Flamel conducted his alchemy experiments, but it was certainly one of the most beautiful places Harry had ever visited. It sort of reminded him of the images he had seen of Château de Chambord, one of the most recognizable châteaux in the world that managed blend traditional French Medieval forms with classical Renaissance structures.

As Harry walked up the double-helix staircase from the basement he had been in with Flamel, he thought through the lesson he had been imparted by the man.

He was very pleased with how this first lesson had gone. While he had not learned how to perform alchemy, Nicolas Flamel's lessons were far more comprehensive than any of the books he had managed to get his hands on. In fact, Harry wished he could forget what was written in those books since it was obvious none of those people were very good alchemists. They hadn't even gone into the laws of Equivalent Exchange!

Everything written in those books had been based around abstract theory and mysticism. The people who wrote them obviously had only a basic understanding of alchemy, enough to get by, but not much else.

So into his thoughts on his lessons with Nicolas Flamel was he that Harry did not even feel the presence near him until said presence spoke in a lilting french accent.

"Oh good, you are still 'ere. I was 'oping to catch you before you left."

Harry blinked, then turned his head. Standing before him was a woman whose beauty few could ever hope to match. Her hair was a long, silvery blond that curved down her scalp like a gently cascading waterfall. That hair framed a face that looked like it had been crafted by the hands of a thousand angels in an effort to show the mortals of this world what perfection looked like.

Wide, almond shaped blue eyes were set on either side of a small, attractive nose, and below that were a pair of full, ruby red cupid bow lips. Her face was soft and complimented her creamy white skin perfectly. Harry, with his constant need to observe and catalog everything he had seen and commit it to memory, noted that Perenelle Flamel's face was perfectly symmetrical, with not a single flaw to be seen.

Even Harry, who had never thought of females with any romantic connotations, could recognize this woman's beauty for what it was. According to a dissertation he had once read on male instincts and their desire to find suitable mates, Perenelle Flamel was the kind of woman any man would drop their significant other for if they had they thought they had a chance with her. She had all of the physical qualities listed as to what physical feature's men find attractive in women.

Like when they first met, Perenelle was wearing very expensive designers clothing. Situated on her torso was a white silk sleeveless blouse featuring a high neckline with an off centre self tie bow fastening, a contrasting black micro polka dot print, a tall keyhole cut to the front and a straight cut hem. The blouse showed off both her slender arms and full-bodied figure in a way that would have men turning their heads fast enough to snap their own necks.

A black wool mini skirt with a waistband with belt loops, button fastening rear pockets and a concealed side zip fastening did very little to cover her long legs as they stretched around her firm, shapely rear, allowing for her exceptionally healthy thighs and calves to be seen by any hypothetical witnesses. Her outfit ended with a pair of black leather sandals that featured an open toe, a panel strap across the foot, a thick strap around the ankle with a buckle fastening, a silver tone and black stripe print and a flat sole.

Harry recognized the clothing as designer clothes from Yves Saint Laurent, one of the most famous French fashion designers in the world, and one of the most expensive as well. Just looking at the outfit Perenelle was wearing, Harry could tell each separate article could likely cover the cost of his entire wardrobe.

He wondered if it was wrong of him to feel envious that she was wearing such expensive and fashionable clothes? Those clothes practically screamed wealth and good taste.

Thankfully, his observations only lasted for a second. Quick enough that he was able to recover himself that Perenelle only took minor amusement in his observing of her.

"Good day, Madame Perenelle," Harry spoke, bowing before the woman. He then looked up and tilted his head. "What did you want to speak with me about?"

"Your clothes," Perenelle said, sniffing at his form fitting jeans and dark green T-shirt in distaste. "zey simply will not do. We must get you some more befitting to your status."

"What's wrong with my clothes?" Harry frowned. Sure, his clothes weren't Yves Saint Laurent, but they weren't bad either.

"Nozing, if you wish to look like a commoner," Perenelle answered as she walked over to him, grabbed his arm in a deceptively powerful grip, and began hauling him away from his previous destination. "'owever, if you wish to maintain ze appearance of a powerful figure and the 'eir to a Most Ancient and Noble 'ouse, you will need better clothing more befitting of your status. Plus you are now my 'usbands apprentice," she added

almost as an after thought, "and I will not have ze apprentice of my husband looking like some plebian."

"Don't worry zough," Perenelle reassured him in a tone that did nothing to reassure. "I won't 'ave you burn your commoner clothes or anyzing. It iz good to be able to fit in with the plebians when you wish to mingle with ze common people."

XoX

It was several hours later (for Harry at least) that the young Potter Heir found himself standing in front of Lisa's home, waiting for his best friend or her mother to answer the door. He had just spent the last several hours with Perenelle at FBG Saint-Honoré Homme Store in Paris trying on several dozen different outfits for the Nicolas Flamel's fairer half. Harry would never admit this to anyone, but he really had enjoyed his time with the gorgeous woman. It was nice to find someone who understood how proper fashion could be used to better ones image and increase ones reputation.

The door soon opened and, not to Harry's surprise, Lisa was the one who was standing behind it. The girl had a bright smile on her face as she greeted him.

"Watcher, Harry! How are... ohmygod! Are those Yves Saint Laurent!?"

"Ah..."

Harry squirmed a bit uncomfortably as he saw Lisa's eyes narrow. He looked down at himself. Having bought several sets of expensive shirts, pants, shorts, and shoes all on Perenelle's 'suggestion', he had decided that he really, really, wanted to wear some of them. It would have been a shame to let them just sit in his closet until he he found a time when wearing them would be appropriate.

Currently, he was wearing a white cotton t-shirt with a crew neck, short sleeves and a contrasting black logo and Basilisk print to the front; a pair of blue cotton jeans featuring a concealed front fastening, a silver-tone button fly, belt loops to the waist, contrast riveting, a classic five pocket design and a straight leg; and black calfskin trainers that had a round toe,

a front lace fastening, a studded side stripe detail, a branded tongue and a rubber sole. In short, nothing he was wearing was below five hundred pounds.

"Yes?"

Lisa's eyes narrowed even further, causing Harry to almost take a step back. He didn't, mainly because his best friend had grabbed a hold of his arm and was currently holding onto it very tightly. Who knew she had such a strong grip?

"And just how did you manage to find the money to buy such expensive clothing?"

They had actually been a gift. Once he and his chaperone-slash fashion consultant otherwise known as the wife of Nicolas Flamel had finished determining which clothes he would be getting, he had been about to pay for them using his muggle credit card. It would have put him back quite a bit, especially since most of his money in his account at HSBC Holdings since most of his money was going into several profitable ventures that would hopefully earn him more money.

That was when Perenelle had paid for his clothes. He had been about to try and stop her. As much as it would have set him back, Harry hated feeling indebted to people, and buying several thousand pounds worth of clothes would have definitely indebted him to Perenelle.

One surprisingly frightening glare later and Harry was the owner of nearly ten thousand pounds worth of Yves Saint Laurent clothing after Perenelle finished paying for it.

On a side note, Harry did not want to be subject to that glare again. It made him truly understand why Nicolas Flamel had been so set on fixing up his floor before his wife returned. If that was the glare he got for doing something his wife would not approve of, Harry could sympathize.

And he supposed it wasn't all bad. Sure, he had just allowed someone to buy him clothing that was so expensive not even the Malfoys would spend that much money on them... or maybe they would, knowing them, but it wasn't like Perenelle was strapped for cash. She did have a

Philosopher's Stone after all. She could just get her husband to turn pewter into gold and sell it in large ingots for an exorbitant price.

Of course, he could not tell Lisa that. Better think up something quick.

"Uh..."

Harry found his brains short circuiting as he tried to come up with a suitable excuse as to why he was wearing expensive clothing he had clearly not possessed yesterday. Really, he probably should have thought things through more when he decided to wear his new clothes.

"Um... my parents left me a lot of money, remember?" It wasn't the best excuse he had ever come up with, but at least the statement was true. Why was it so much harder to lie to this girl than it was to lie to an adult? "I just... I thought it would be nice if I had some, well, some nice clothes. You know?"

Harry began to get increasingly nervous as Lisa continued to stare at him, her expression surprisingly blank. Just where had she learned to stare down someone like that anyways?

"You," she determined after an intermittent amount of time, her grip tightening on his arm as she gave him a chilling smile. "Are you going to take me shopping."

Yes, he definitely had not thought everything through when he had decided to wear these clothes.

He could already feel his wallet getting lighter.

XoX

Alchemy was a lot harder than Harry thought it would be. No. That wasn't quite accurate. Harry knew that alchemy would be hard from just listening to Nicolas Flamel's lectures. He just hadn't realized how hard it truly was.

Some things about alchemy were easier than others. For example, Harry had already memorized all of the laws and rules that went into transmutation. He also had the entire periodic table already memorized

and could recite the chemicals listed in it, their atomic number, electron configuration, and the recurring chemical properties found within each one.

However, merely understanding the sequence of transmutation and the limitations of Equivalent Exchange was not enough. Just as the processes of "Comprehension, Deconstruction, Reconstruction" and "In order to gain, something of equal value must be lost in return" are cyclical concepts, and the periodic table is simply knowledge, the foundation upon which alchemy was built are none of those. They are simply the laws by which alchemy must abide by.

The real difficulty with alchemical transmutation lay in the creation of symbols known as a Transmutation Circle. A Transmutation Circle could either be drawn on the spot when a transmutation is necessary (in chalk, pencil, ink, paint, blood or even traced in dirt) or permanently etched or inscribed beforehand, but without it, transmutation is generally impossible and all Transmutation Circles are made up of two parts:

The circle itself was a conduit which focused and dictated the flow of magic, allowing an Alchemist to distribute their magic and the matter they wanted to transmute in order to create a transmutation. It represented the cyclical flow of the bodies magical core and turned that power to manipulable ends.

Inside the circle were specific alchemical runes. These runes could vary widely based on ancient alchemical studies, texts and experimentation, but corresponded to a different form of energy, allowing the energy that was focused within the circle to be released in the way most conducive to the alchemist's desired effect. In basic alchemy, these runes would often take the form of triangles (which, when positioned differently, can represent the elements of either water, earth, fire or air), but would often be composed of varying polygons built from different triangles.

For example: the hexagram is a commonly used base rune in Transmutation Circles because it created eight multi-directional triangles when inscribed and can therefore represent all four classical elements at once. Other, more esoteric runes (including astrological symbols, symbolic images and varying lines of text) are prevalent and represent a

multitude of other, specific functions for the alchemical energy that was released.

It was incredibly difficult, learning and experimenting with all of the complex and varying differences that can make up a Transmutation Circle. Harry had already made a number of failed attempts at creating a basic alchemical circle.

The reason for this was because Nicolas Flamel would not let him copy the work of others. He wanted Harry's Transmutation Circle to be completely original, using only ideas and concepts from other people's work in his own.

Of course, this was only because there were only so many ideas that could be used when creating what amounted to a basic Transmutation Circle. There were only so many circles that could be created to transmute a specific material.

Flamel had given Harry the knowledge on how to create a Transmutation Circle, but that was all. Now he wanted Harry to put that knowledge to good use under his guidance. He would not help Harry, merely observe and make sure the boy didn't blow himself up.

So far, the only Transmutation Circle Harry had been able to create that was up to par and original was a circle that transmuted wood into a wooden figurine of a bird. A Japanese Wagtail to be precise. The circle itself was basically a large circle with a smaller circle inside of it with a five centimeter radial difference exactly, a square that touched the outer circle, followed by a another square that ran perpendicular to the larger square and touched the smaller circle on four opposite points.

It was the first Transmutation Circle he had managed to complete that actually worked. It had taken him sixteen attempts to make it, something that Flamel had actually told him was beyond admirable as far as his progress was concerned, but bothered Harry, who felt he should have been able to create it in less time and with less failures.

Which was why he was still sitting at the table inside of Nicolas Flamel's alchemy lab, working on another Transmutation Circle. So far the only alchemy he had been able to accomplish was one that transmuted by

way of the Four Classical Elements (Water, Earth, Fire, and Air). The wood he had used for his bird transmutation had been Red Maple, which contained 21.2% lignin, 17.1 Cellulose, 2.8% Extractives, and 5.2% Ash. It was an Earth based element, though it had traces of water in it due to the moisture often retained in wood. That was why the Transmutation Circle had been so simple to create, and just simple in general.

This time, Harry was going to try a different Transmutation. He wanted to use the Three Essential Principles of alchemy (Salt, Sulfur, and Mercury) instead.

Salt would be the easiest. It was a simple compound containing sodium chloride, NaCl, and water, H₂O, which was formed by neutralizing sodium hydroxide, NaOH, a base chemical, with hydrogen chloride, HCl, and acid: $\text{HCl} + \text{NaOH} \rightarrow \text{NaCl} + \text{H}_2\text{O}$. It was a simple empirical formula for ionic salt. The only issue would be discover how much of these chemicals salt contained in order to know the quantity he was transmuting, and that was a relatively easy issue to solve as salt was an ionic compound that had an equal number of sodium and chlorine atoms. All he had to do was create the formula needed to discover the amount of each chemical contained within a gram of salt, which he had already done.

But while salt may be the easiest of the Three Essential Principles to transmute, it was not the one Harry wanted to do. He needed to challenge himself, to push his mind beyond it's boundaries so that he could exceed his own limitations. That was why he wanted to use Mercury for his transmutation.

Mercury was a chemical element with the symbol Hg and an atomic number of 80. It was commonly known as quicksilver, due to it's silvery liquid form. It was also formerly known as hydragyrum, a Greek word that combined "Hydr" for water and "agryrum" for silver.

It was also the most difficult of the Three Principles to transmute.

There were two oxidized states in which Mercury can exist, which have been unoriginally dubbed state I and II by scientists.

Different from its lighter neighbors, cadmium and zinc, mercury formed

simple stable compounds with metal-metal bonds. The mercury(I) compounds were diamagnetic and feature the dimeric cation, Hg_2^{2+} . Stable derivatives included the chloride and nitrate. Treatment of Hg(I) compounds complexation with strong ligands such as sulfide, cyanide, etc. induced disproportionation to Hg_2^{2+} and elemental mercury. Mercury(I) chloride, a colorless solid also known as calomel, was really the compound with the formula Hg_2Cl_2 , with the connectivity Cl-Hg-Hg-Cl. It was a standard in electrochemistry that reacted with chlorine to give mercuric chloride, which could resist further oxidation.

Indicative of its tendency to bond to itself, mercury forms mercury polycations, which consisted of linear chains of mercury centers, capped with a positive charge. One example is $\text{Hg}_2^{2+} \cdot 3(\text{AsF}_6^-)_2$.

Mercury(II) was the most common oxidation state and was the main one in nature as well. All four mercuric halides are known. They formed tetrahedral complexes with other ligands but the halides adopt linear coordination geometry, somewhat like Ag^+ did. Best known is mercury(II) chloride, an easily sublimating white solid. HgCl_2 forms coordination complexes that are typically tetrahedral, e.g. $\text{HgCl}_2 \cdot 4\text{L}$.

Mercury(II) oxide, the main oxide of mercury, arises when the metal is exposed to air for long periods at elevated temperatures. It will revert to the elements upon heating near 400°C , as was demonstrated by Priestly in an early synthesis of pure mercury. The oxides of mercury are poorly characterized, as they are for its neighbors gold and silver.

Being a soft metal, mercury forms very stable derivatives with the heavier chalcogens. Preeminent is mercury(II) sulfide, HgS , which occurs in nature as the ore cinnabar and is the brilliant pigment vermilion. Like ZnS , HgS crystallizes in two forms, the reddish cubic form and the black zinc blende form. Mercury(II) selenide (HgSe) and mercury(II) telluride (HgTe) are also known, these as well as various derivatives, e.g. mercury cadmium telluride and mercury zinc telluride being semiconductors useful as infrared detector materials.

Mercury(II) salts form a variety of complex derivatives with ammonia. These included Millon's base (Hg_2N^+), the one-dimensional polymer (salts of $\text{Hg}(\text{NH}_2)^+$), and "fusible white precipitate" or $[\text{Hg}(\text{NH}_3)_2]\text{Cl}_2$.

Known as Nessler's reagent, potassium tetraiodomercurate(II)(HgI_2-4) was still occasionally used to test for ammonia owing to its tendency to form the deeply colored iodide salt of Millon's base.

Harry was going to use Mercury II for his transmutation, as it was the most common and natural state for Mercury to be in. Using Mercury I would be too dangerous at his knowledge level right now. While he wanted a challenge, he had no desire to go near the other oxidized state at his current level. He was looking for a way to push his mind's limits and break them, not commit suicide.

"You really should get out of ze 'ouse and get some fresh air. Staying cooped up in zis room isn't 'ealthy for a vibrant young man like yourself."

Harry blinked, his mind waking from its haze of formulaic equations. He turned his head and looked up to see Flamel's other half staring at him with a small frown on her gorgeous face and her arms crossed under her chest.

"Can't," Harry said, shaking his head. "I need to finish this transmutation circle before the end of the day."

Perenelle Flamel raised a single, delicate eyebrow.

"Need to? Or want to?"

"What's the difference?" asked Harry. "Need and want are dependent upon the realities of the people using those terms and hold no real meaning in the grand scheme of things. Do I *want* to finish this transmutation circle by the end of the day? Yes. Do I *need* to finish it? Probably not, but I will never be satisfied if I don't, thus, I do need to finish it for the sake of my own peace of mind."

"I don't want to hear your philosophical speak right now," Perenelle's arms went from crossed under her breasts to cocked at a ninety degree angle on either side of her body as she placed her fists on her hips. "You 'ave been in here for six hours doing nozing more zan staring at ze wall. Clearly, your mind is exhausted and needs a break."

"Thank you for the concern, but I am fine," Harry said. He was

determined to finish this transmutation circle today come hell or high water.

However, while he may have been prepared for Armageddon to come, he was obviously not prepared for an angry Perenelle. The woman fixed him with a scowl so fierce were Harry not sitting he would have taken a step back (or run away screaming). As it was, he tilted back in his chair to get as far away from the woman as possible.

Was it just him, or was the temperature beginning to get warmer.

And were those feathers sprouting from her neck?

"Harry James Potter, you will leave this room right now, head down to Paris and see the sights, or so help me I will burn you to cinders!"

If it weren't such a terrifying sight, Harry would have been amused by the woman's mothering. Any amusement he might have felt though, disappeared in the face of the woman's whose features seemed to grow sharper and more angular by the second. Her eyes were blazing flames of blue fire that struck feelings of an unknown fear in his heart and caused his mind to conjure up horrible images of his own body being burnt to ashes.

Needless to say, Harry couldn't agree fast enough.

He also couldn't leave the room fast enough.

Damn, that woman was terrifying! She would give Voldemort a run for his money!

"Apprentice?" Harry looked up from where he was standing bent over and using his hands on his knees as support while he tried to regain his breath after running from the alchemy lab to see Flamel staring at him curiously. For some reason, the man had taken to calling him apprentice ever since their first meeting. Not Harry, not Potter, not even Harry Potter. Just apprentice. It was kind of annoying, but Harry put up with it for the sake of learning. "What are you still doing here? I thought you left hours ago."

"Ah... no..." Harry mumbled, trying to regain his breath after it had left him in the face of such a horrifying sight. Truly, that Perenelle Flamel was the fiercest woman he had ever met, and considering he had met Professor McGonagall that's saying something. "I stayed behind after you left. I wanted to finish that transmutation circle I was working on."

"I see, I see," Flamel nodded his head in a sagely manner that did not go with his twenty-something year old looks. "It is good to see such dedication. Did you finish your circle?"

"No."

Flamel blinked.

"Then what are you doing in here?" he asked, frowning sternly at the young man as he prepared a lecture. "You should still be in the lab working. Transmutation is a process that requires constant work and dedication. You cannot just skimp out on your work whenever you feel like it."

"I ran into your wife," Harry said dryly. "Or, to be more precise, she ran into me."

Flamel paused at that, before nodding his head and adopting a 'sagely' look again.

"Now I understand," he said, patting Harry's shoulder in sympathy. "She does the same thing to me when I get caught up in my work. Let me give you some advice. Women are like cats. Not those small, domestic house cats, but those big, vicious lions you see in the Sahara. So long as you do what they say, you're fine, but if you don't, They'll eat you alive."

"Oh, iz zat what I am now?"

Harry and Flamel froze as a beautiful, sickly sweet voice entered their ears. It was easily the most frightening sound either of them had ever heard.

As one, the pair woodenly turned their heads to see Perenelle standing in the hallway with an irate look on her face as she glared at her husband. If

looks could kill, Flamel would have combusted into flames long ago.

On a side note, Harry noticed that she was definitely sprouting feathers around her neck.

"A-ah, h-hello, dear," Flamel stuttered out as the woman took a step towards them. He and Harry took a step back. "How was your day?"

"My day was just fine," Perenelle smiled a truly unpleasantly pleasant smile as she stalked towards them, her grace as she moved making her look like some kind of bird of prey. "I got up and made love to my 'usband (Harry gagged. He did not need to know that!), I went out and did some shopping, managed to convince your apprentice to relax, and zen got called an overgrown feline by my 'usband. Why, zis day has been positively glorious."

"Now, Penny," Flamel held his hands up in a defensive fashion. "I was only trying to impart some of my wisdom on the fairer sex to young Harry here."

"Zen you should 'ave kept your mouth shut," Perenelle said, hiking up the sleeves to her white, long sleeved shirt. "'arry, why don't you 'ead into Paris for a while before using ze time turner and heading back home. The nightlife in Paris iz absolutely to die for."

"Of course," Harry muttered, scrambling away as quickly as he could. There was absolutely no way he was staying anywhere near that woman when she was angry.

He could hear Flamel pleading with him to stay, demanding he take his punishment with his master, but even he knew better than to get in the way of an angry wife. Soon enough, the pleading of his teacher turned into screams of pain, causing thousands of horrible images of what may have been happening behind him to appear in Harry's mind.

Sorry Flamel, but it was the duty of a Master to protect the apprentice, not the other way around.

XoX

When Perenelle Flamel said that the nightlife in Paris was 'to die for' Harry was pretty sure she forgot he was only eleven years old. Even though he would be twelve in just a little over a month, that made very little difference in the grand scheme of things.

The truth was, the night of Paris really did seem quite lively. Harry could see a number of bars and clubs where young adults were enjoying themselves dancing and drinking. Everyone looked like they were having a blast from what he had seen through his view in the windows of various bars, clubs and pubs. Unfortunately, even if Harry were disinclined to take part in the partying, he wouldn't be able to.

Still, Harry had to admit now that he was out of the Flamel's small mansion his mind felt a lot more clear. Maybe it was the cool night air? The breeze definitely felt soothing against his scalp as it ruffled his hair.

Harry found himself walking down Boulevard de Clichy, where the Moulin Rouge was located. The Moulin Rouge, a famous cabaret known for their "can-can" dancers. The house had been co-founded by Charles Zidler and Joseph Oller in 1889. It might not have been a national landmark like the Louvre or the Arc de Triomphe, but it was a place that had quite a bit of history behind it.

The Moulin Rouge was easily distinguished from the rest of the buildings by the large windmill. Of course, it wasn't really a windmill, just a large red cylinder with a traditional pointed roof, classic pentagon framed stained windows with diamond shaped windows above it and four large, glowing, neon red sails set into the top of a rectangular building. To the left was more neon red lighting that curved around a half circle built above the entrance with the name of the building on it, and on the right side of the entrance were large posters featuring the routine that would be showing that night like large billboards.

For a moment, Harry thought about catching a show. He had read what kinds of shows there were in the history books, but reading about something and seeing it in person were always two completely different things.

True, he was not of age, but that mattered very little when you were a

wizard. Harry had been getting a bit better at the mind arts, using random non magical beings and a few witches and wizards he saw whenever he went to Diagon Alley to practice his Legillimency.

He didn't think he was that good, as most people didn't even bother shielding their thoughts, but he was positive he could use some basic Legillimency to confund people into thinking he was older than he really was. It shouldn't be too hard.

On the other hand, he wasn't really one for breaking the law without their being some kind of benefit towards him. And satisfying his curiosity was not a large enough benefit for him to risk it.

Besides, he didn't want to have to confund everyone in the building. That would just be a pain.

So Harry left after admiring the bright structure for a few moments, deciding to take a quick shortcut down an alley so he could reach the next street and continue his walk.

It was while walking down that alley, however, that Harry's nose picked up something that immediately had him on alert.

Ever since he had become an animagus, one of the many things he had noted were his increased senses. His eyes could now see in the dark, his hearing was far sharper than it had ever been, and his nose was capable of picking up scents from a little over fifty meters away. Even when he was not in his Jaguar animagus form, his three senses were still much better than those of a humans.

And right now the tang of copper was on the wind. Blood. That was what he smelled.

Taking a few sniffs of the air around him, Harry pinpointed the general direction of the scent and quickly made his way towards it. His animalistic and predatory grace ensured that his steps were silent even as he increased the speed of his stride. Before too long, he discovered where the source of the blood was coming from. A second story window to a cheap motel was open, the coppery scent of blood wafting along the breeze came from there.

Harry took a deep breath, then blew it out as he opened a crack in the barrier containing his magic. The flow was directed towards his body, more specifically his limbs and core, strengthening them to the levels of an Olympic athlete.

His limbs reinforced with magic, Harry ran towards the building and then jumped.

The jump easily carried him a meter into the air. Harry's left hand shot out and caught onto a small ledge that was sticking out from underneath the window. The muscles in his arm tensed, then, with a powerful heave, Harry flipped himself over, his body contorting in ways that would make a gymnast green with envy as his feet landed on the ledge.

The ledge was very small, Harry noted quickly as his feet began to slip off due to their not being enough room to contain him. At most, he would say the ledge was only an inch or so long, and with only his heels being able to find purchase, it would not be long before he fell.

Utilizing one of the other powers granted to him as a natural animagus, Harry shifted his fingernails into sharp claws, which he dug into the grout in between the bricks of the building. Moving carefully, Harry soon found his way to the edge of the window, where his enhanced hearing easily picked up the voices in the room.

"È morta."

Harry blinked. That was Italian. His Italian was nowhere near as good as his French, but he had at least studied it enough that he could understand it fluently even if he still had trouble speaking it.

He made a mental note to find someone who could help him finish learning Italian. There was only so much he could learn from books.

"Come fai a dirlo?"

"Non sento il battito.."

"Non aveva un battito dall'inizio, idiota. È un abominio, ricordatelo."

"Oh, è vero."

Harry frowned. He could understand the gist of what they were saying, but there was so many holes in their dialogue that he was sure he was missing something.

"Sai, per essere un abominio non è poi così male."

The sound of something unzipping? Reached Harry's ears. Yes, that was the unmistakable sound of something being unzipped.

"Cosa diavolo vorresti fare?"

"Che c'è? Non scopo da mesi. E comunque non si lamenterà."

"Soddisferesti i tuoi impulsi bestiali scopandoti un'abominio!? Lurido maiale."

"Non stare a guardare allora. Vai ad aspettare fuori in corridoio come un piccolo idiota."

There was some more swearing and insults spewing from the other man, but Harry was no longer listening.

These... these sick monsters had just killed someone, some girl, and now one of them was going to desecrate her? Harry would freely admit that his moral compass was slightly skewed by his own ideals and desires, but he would never, in a million years even think about doing what this sick... sick... bastard was about to do now!

Without even thinking about the situation, Harry reacted, his body moving long before his mind began working.

He spun himself around, grabbing onto the windowsill and swinging himself into the room. As he rolled across the floor and sprung back to his feet, his eyes easily cataloged everything that was happening within the room.

There were two men. Both had a darker skin tone than people traditionally found in France, and their facial structures were different as

well. They were of Italian descent, obviously. One of them was near the door, looking like he was about to leave. The other was standing over a pale looking girl lying on the bed with her arms extended to her sides in a sick parody of a cross with a shirt that was torn open, exposing much of her skin and bra, and had her pants off to reveal white lace panties.

The man who was standing over her had his pants and briefs down around his ankles and his hands on her knickers and it was very clear to Harry what he was going to do.

Harry would not give him the chance.

Before the man could even react to his presence, Harry was already charging him. The man's head snapped over in his direction, his eyes widening in shock and then fear as Harry's hand changed into a paw with sharp claws.

Stumbling backwards, the man tried to move away from him, but his pants caught around his ankles and he began to fall. As he fell, Harry swiped at the man's throat, carving four deep gouges into his esophagus, trachea and vocal chords. The man's eyes widened in unfathomable pain, his mouth opening to release a yell that was reduced to mere gurgling as his vocal chords had been cut and blood welled up in his throat.

The Italian man hit the ground with a thud, his lifeblood spilling out of his throat and his eyes dulling as he bled to death.

"diavolo!" The other man shouted as he pulled out a gun, a pistol of some sort. Harry did not recognize the gun. He had never cared for such weapons, thus he had never bothered to study up on them beyond how they were used in various wars throughout recent history. All he cared about was that it was pointed at him.

As quickly as he could, Harry moved, twisting his body slightly to the left and forward just as the loud cracking of thunder rang out from the weapon.

Less than two seconds later the Italian man was lying dead on the ground, his face torn apart where Harry's pawed hand had ripped the

flesh and muscles off.

Harry hissed in pain as he pressed his now normal hand to his bleeding shoulder. He had not been fast enough to avoid getting shot. Thankfully, it didn't really hurt that much. Compared to what he had already suffered through last year, a bullet wound was nothing more than a pin prick.

Still, it wouldn't do to have the bullet inside of him. It would probably get infected.

With a minor burst from his magic, Harry pushed the bullet wound out of his shoulder, his teeth grit slightly as a minor stab of pain arced through him. A second later, Harry soothed the wound and healed it up with his magic, leaving nothing more than light pink scar tissue that would disappear within a day or so.

His wound now healed, Harry leaned down and picked up the bullet, bringing it to his eyes so he could examine it. Despite the blood coating it, Harry could see that it was made from a very different material than other bullets, which were usually made from lead or steel and sometimes copper. This was not made from either.

"Silver."

Harry frowned as he dropped the bullet and stood back up. He quickly walked over to the girl lying on the bed. The first thing he noted was that she was pale, very pale. Her skin was so white that it almost looked translucent.

At least, what skin he could see. Much of her body was covered in blood. Surprisingly enough, except for a single puncture wound on her neck that was still bleeding pretty badly and looked like it had just barely missed anything vital, she did not look like she had any wounds at all.

She was also absolutely gorgeous, Harry noted almost clinically. Her face, though pale, had very aristocratic and fair features, like a princess of some kind. High cheek bones that were softened by her heart shaped face, a small nose, thick eyelashes and full lips painted an almost blood red created a vision of beauty that was only exceeded by Perenelle. The raven colored hair framing her face like some kind of darkened halo only

added an aura of mystery to her otherwise fair features.

Her body was nothing to scoff at either. He could see the supple yet powerful leg muscles of her thighs and calves, the deceptive hint of muscles in her slender arms and the definition in her stomach that was hidden under what very little fatty tissue she had. Between that and her lithe waist and well developing bust, she was definitely one of those girls who most teenage males would place under the 'erotic' category he had read about in magazines. At a guess, he would place her age at around maybe fourteen years old.

Reaching out, Harry placed a hand on her neck to check for a pulse. Those guys had said she was dead, but they had also said she was an 'abomination' as well. He didn't really know what that meant, but figured there was something unusual about her. The reason they were chasing her, perhaps.

He was surprised by how warm her skin was. It wasn't exceedingly hot or anything, but considering she was supposed to be dead her body was surprisingly warm. Though that could be because they had just killed her recently. Maybe.

It was only a few seconds after he put his index and middle finger over her pulse point that something shocking happened.

The girl, who he was fairly sure had not been breathing moments ago, gasped loudly. Before Harry could pull his hand away in surprise, her eyes shot wide open just as one of her hands flew up and grabbed onto his with a titan grip. Harry would have tried to remove his wrist from her grip, but found himself too surprised to do anything more than gape.

Silvery-blue eyes with a strange glow darted around the room, confused and frightened as they looked for something, the two men Harry assumed, before landing on him. Those eyes looked at him for several moments, fear leaving for only confusion.

Just as quickly as the eyes had opened, they fluttered closed, and the hand gripping Harry's went limp and fell back onto the bed. It was only after the girl went unconscious again that the young raven haired boy realized something very important.

He had no idea what to do now. There were three dead people in this room, two Italian men and a young teenage female who was apparently not as dead as he thought she was. Not only that, but the evidence of a struggle was obvious. There were blood marks all over the room, a table stained with blood had been turned over, and the bed had even more blood stains on it. Then there was...

Harry looked down at the two men he had killed, grimacing. It would be obvious to anyone with basic skills in observation that they had been killed by an animal. You just couldn't make slash marks like that unless you were Freddy Krueger.

Or some kind of large predatory feline.

Biting his lip, Harry's mind worked overtime to think of what he should do. First, he needed to get rid of the bodies. Would disintegration, or vanishing as he learned it was called, work on a human? He didn't sense any latent magic in them, so their magic resistance would be null, but they were also humans, their anatomy was far more complex than that of, say, a piece of paper.

If only he was further along in his studies of alchemy he could probably find some way to transmute them into something else. Alas, he was still stuck on his second Transmutation Circle, which would probably be far less complex than one that could transmute a human being.

What should he do?

Fortunately, or unfortunately, the situation was taken out of his hands when the sound of thumping feet reached his ears. Someone was coming. No. Several someones. Harry counted no more than one, two, three, six people running down the hall, their thumping feet getting louder.

The police? Maybe?

Whatever the case, he couldn't stay here. Harry looked around, quickly deciding on what he should do with so little time.

Grabbing the girl as he had no desire to leave her there for someone else to find, especially as she appeared to be alive in some strange sense

even though she did not have a pulse, Harry activated the portkey he had been given by Nicolas Flamel so that he could return to the man's estate each day for his lessons.

"Alchemy!"

Alright, this chapter is now finished. I want to thank everyone who reviewed the last chapter. I got 158 reviews. It pleases me to know that you guys enjoy this story enough to inform me. Or to tell me how much you hate my guts for ruining Harry Potter. That pleases me too, cuz I'm an ass like that.

....

Right.

Anyways, please let me know what you think of my story. Your questions, comments and critiques are always welcome. Also, be sure to check out my blog, Thoughts and Wonderings of a Fanfiction Writer, where all of your questions and my thoughts on my stories and other random shit happening in life will be answered. The link is on my profile page. I write in my blog at least once a day, so the next post which will contain my thoughts and answers to your questions will be up some time tomorrow.

Lost Letters

A/N: I don't normally do this, but figured what I have to tell you is important enough to put it up here for you to see. I was going through my last chapter, you know, chapter 4 of this story, and found something that bothered me. Naturally, I changed it. Now, this change, it doesn't really effect the story, but it's big enough that you may want to go back and take a look before reading this chapter. It's at the end of chapter 4, the moment where Harry is checking to see if the vampire girl is still alive.

You may now continue reading.

Chapter 5: Lost Letters

Harry Potter drew his alchemy circle with a piece of chalk under the careful eye of Nicholas Flamel, who was there to ensure his young charge did not make any mistakes and blow himself up attempting to do something as precise and calculating as transmuting mercury.

He had wanted to use his blood for the medium, as blood was the best medium for channeling magic through due to it being inherently magical in nature, but Flamel had shot him down by stating that, while true, blood was really only used for the most complex of transmutation circles and not worth the amount of blood he would need to use to create such a simple circle.

The transmutation circle Harry was drawing right now was exactly one foot in diameter and circular. Within the circle was a square, which had it's four points touching the circle horizontally to Harry. Another square was present in this one, it was smaller, small enough to fit into the first square, and had been rotated exactly forty five degrees so that it's four points were touching the lines of the first square, making it look like a diamond to Harry. One last circle was situated inside of the square, with just a few parts of it's curve touching the four lines that made up the square.

In the center of the circle was the alchemical symbol for Mercury; a cross, a circle on top of the cross, followed by a crescent three-fourths circle on top of that with the curved edge lapping over the top edge of the full circle. Surrounding the symbol and outlining the inside of the inner circle was text, Latin to be precise.

The thousands of tiny Latin alphabetical symbols were the keys to this transmutation. While the circle itself would directed the flow of energy, and the symbol was letting the circle know which element was being transmuted, it was the writing that was being used to mold that directed energy to transmute the Mercury in the way Harry desired.

And in the center of it all, standing completely still as Harry had put a stasis charm on it, was exactly fifteen liters of Mercury shaped like a cylinder.

"Let me inspect it before you activate the circle."

Flamel stepped forward with Harry quickly and silently complying with the demand. Right now, the ancient alchemist was in his 'teacher mode'. It would not be wise to cross or countermand anything he said when like this, especially since he knew what he was doing when it came to alchemy whereas Harry was just starting.

"This is pretty good," Flamel mused, rubbing his stubble free chin. "Your circle was drawn flawlessly. I see no error in the design and there are no imperfection in your lines. Some of your script could be better, and I would have used something other than Latin, like Greek or perhaps even Mandarin for a transmutation such as this. Still, this should work for your purposes."

Harry took the criticism with grace, even if he didn't necessarily like having his work criticized. He knew better than to not accept the advice given. This man knew what he was saying.

Nicholas Flamel soon stepped back and gestured for Harry to activate the circle, which he did, crossing his hands in front of himself to form an 'X' as he began channeling the necessary amount of power needed to complete the transmutation. He had to be careful here. Too much magic and he would overload the circle and blow himself to pieces, too little and

nothing would happen. He needed to use a very precise amount.

Placing his hands on the circle, he began pushing his magic into it, allowing the transmutation circle to regulate the flow of his energy and use it to help transmute the Mercury into the shape he desired.

Blue light began emitting from the chalk used in the creation of his transmutation circle as it was activated. Lightning arcs of magic shot forth from the Mercury as the transmutation began to take place. The Mercury began to expand upwards while the puddle it had formed started to shrink as the liquid metal began taking a more solidified shape. A rounded pommel formed first, followed by a knobbed hilt containing ridges for finger placement, then a slightly square shaped guard with rounded edges formed as the silvery substance expanded and morphed. This was soon followed by a leaf-shaped, double edged blade that looked like it was linked together as separate pieces instead of being crafted from one whole sheet of metal.

Harry grabbed the hilt of the blade, a gladius, as the light from the transmutation circle died down and lifted it up.

Nicholas began clapping.

"Marvelous! Simply marvelous!" the old man who looked no older than twenty crowed. "Such an incredible transmutation for your second work! You, my young apprentice, seem to be a natural at this."

Harry grinned. He was not above accepting the praise for his accomplishment. It was nice to actually be praised for something. At school, he kept most of his talent hidden since he didn't want too many people getting jealous of him. That happened enough as it with what he was already showing. He shuddered to think about what would happen if people learned of his true talent.

"Thank you," Harry bowed his head in acknowledgment.

"Now, let me take a look at the blade."

Harry handed the sword over to his teacher, allowing him to inspect the blade carefully.

"This is pretty fine craftsmanship. A traditional roman era gladius. Hmm... this blade is made up of separate segments."

"It's meant to be used as a whip," Harry elucidated the man. "By channeling magic through the blade, you can elongate it through a string attached to each segment, allowing for longer reach."

"I see," Flamel pulled his out his wand and gave it a quick wave. A few feet away, a large block of wood appeared out of thin air.

The ancient alchemist quickly thrust the sword forward as if he were about to impale some unseen enemy through the chest. The segmented parts quickly separated and a long 'string' of mercury could be seen between each segment. The blade soon reached it's target, stabbing straight through the piece of wood with impunity as several of the segments passed through it. The end then proceeded to curl, wrapping around the piece of wood like some kind of snake.

A quick yank on the hilt and the segmented blade contracted, slicing the wood into several pieces that fell to the ground with a series of clanks.

"I see what you did here. You used mercury because it's the most malleable metal. Unlike steel or iron, mercury, even in a solid state like this, is much more easy to manipulate. By channeling your magic through the blade you can change the density and hardness of the metal without affecting how sharp it is."

"Exactly."

"A ridiculously complicated transmutation for your second time," Flamel chuckled. "You're a pretty ambitious student, aren't you?"

Harry shrugged.

"There's no point in learning something if you're not willing to push yourself as far as you can go. I would rather fail at something, knowing I gave it my all, then succeed at something because I wasn't willing to take a risk and try pushing my knowledge to it's limits."

"You... you are quite possible the strangest eleven year old I have ever

met," Nicholas chuckled, grinning broadly when he saw Harry bristle at being called out on his age. He knew Harry hated it when he did that, which was probably why he did it.

"In any case, I will keep this here for you, since it is very unlikely that you have anywhere to put it right now. Tomorrow, we will begin working on combining the Four Classical Elements with the Three Essential Principles in order to create more complex transmutations with multiple elements in them."

Knowing a dismissal when he heard one, Harry gave a small bow of acknowledgment before leaving the room.

He quickly ascended the stairs, headed down the hall after reaching the third floor, and soon found himself in front of an unmarked door. Opening the door, Harry stepped inside to find himself standing in one of the many guest rooms the Flamel Manor possessed.

He honestly didn't know why they had so many fully furnished guest rooms, as neither Nicholas nor Perennelle enjoyed much company. He supposed it was just in their nature, being people who had grown up several hundred years ago and were simply used to keeping with specific traditions and customs when it came to home building.

The room was nicely furnished, if a little bare. Cream colored walls and soft carpeting made up the basic structure of the room. There was a bed, a dresser and a nightstand, all made up of the same rich mahogany and built with the kind of elegance often found in renaissance décor. On one side of the room was a window. Normally, it would be open to allow the sunlight through, as well as to offer a grand view of the well maintained gardens surrounding the small manor and the large amount of forest beyond that. Right now it was closed. To the left were two doors, one leading to a restroom and the other a walk in closet.

Harry was not the only occupant in the room. There were two other people.

Sitting on a chair next to the bed was Perennelle, reading the morning newspaper. She looked the same as always, beautiful and regal. You would never be able to tell that she had been up practically all night last

night.

As always, she was wearing ridiculously expensive clothing. This time she looked to be wearing a black robe gown made from expensive silk that seemed to shimmer and glisten whenever she moved.

Perenelle was the one who had healed the other occupant of the room. Harry had been surprised to learn that the slightly haughty woman was a skilled practitioner in healing magics. She had most likely just gotten finished checking on her patient. That, or she was waiting for him to come in. It was impossible to tell which.

And there, laying on the bed was the very girl Harry had rescued last night. To say he had been shocked when the girl had proven to be alive was like saying Perennelle was not the one wearing the pants in her relationship with Nicolas. Understatement just didn't begin to cover it. Harry had gone nearly catatonic when the girl had latched onto him and opened her eyes after he had killed those men, proving that she was alive.

Well, technically alive, considering she was a vampire.

Thinking back on that whole incident in hindsight, Harry actually felt kind of stupid for not having realized what she was. The people who had 'killed' her mentioned that she was an 'abomination' and used silver bullets to harm her. Those should have been indicators right there that she was not human, though he would have assumed she was a werewolf rather than a vampire due to the silver used in the bullets.

Let it be known that having eidetic memory does not always mean someone makes the connections in various pieces of information right away.

Then again, Harry did not really know much about vampires. Or anything at all, really. There were many movies he had watched featuring Count Dracula and many historical text on vampires, but how accurate was the information found there? It was all just superstition and hearsay. There was no telling if anything in those books and movies were actually accurate.

Perhaps he could learn though, once the girl woke up. It would be interesting to actually speak with a real life vampire and see how they saw things from their perspective.

"How is she?" asked Harry as he walked up to the bedside, his gaze never leaving the vampire's face. She looked much more peaceful now than she had when they last met. Though that could just be because of the setting he was seeing her in.

"She iz doing fine," Perennelle looked up from her newspaper to look at the vampire in the bed, then to Harry. "I 'ealed 'er wounds last night. I 'ave also purified her blood of the silver poisoning her. Ze blood you gave me helped greatly as well." She gave him a surprisingly calculating look. "Your blood contains much magic. I would almost assume you 'ave ze blood of a magical creature in your veins."

"Well, aren't witches and wizards technically magical creatures?" asked Harry, causing Perennelle to snort.

"Not to zem, apparently."

Harry chuckled a bit, finding the same irony in his statement that Perennelle did, before reaching down and pulling his mother's wand out from his ankle holster. Using it, he conjured himself a much more basic looking chair than Perennelle's elegant looking one (he was not that good at Conjuration yet) next to the beautiful woman so he could sit down.

It had been a very pleasant surprise to him when Perennelle and Nicolas Flamal had informed him that he could use his mother's wand for magic without alerting the Ministry. According to them, the trace, which was the way all magical governments belonging to the ICW tracked underage magic, was taken off the wand of a witch or wizard after they reached the age of majority, seventeen. Since his mother was in her twenties when she was killed, the trace did not exist on it. Ergo, he could use magic with it.

As Harry sat down, he began checking over the girl's vitals to make sure she was still alive. He knew that Perennelle had already done so, but he preferred double checking everything himself, just to make sure.

Of course, because the girl was a vampire, he couldn't use normal means for checking to see if she was alive. He had to use a spell for that, one that Perennelle had taught him the night before when he had brought the girl back.

"It iz amuzing to watch you act like a mozzar 'en, 'arry," Perennelle's lilting voice teased him, an amused smile curving her beautiful lips. It was a different side from the haughty woman he usually saw, though that could just mean she was warming up to him.

Harry flushed a bit, but did not stop checking the girl over.

"I rescued her and brought her in. That makes her my responsibility."

"Zat you did," Perennelle nodded as she looked at the young man, her gaze thoughtful. "Still, it iz awfully unusual for someone so young to act so... mature and responsible."

Harry took a deep breath. He knew that Perennelle was not saying that to point out his age like Nicolas had when he mentioned it, but simply stating an observation that illuminated a part of his character that she found did not fit the criteria of someone his physical age represented. However, hearing those words from her and Nicolas, from anyone really, bothered him more than he would ever care to admit.

For so long, Harry had gone to great efforts to define himself as a young, independent adult. He did not live at home with relatives, he lived in a house which he paid rent for through manual labor by people who just so happened to be blood related to him. Everything he owned from his clothing (minus the clothes Perennelle 'insisted' on buying for him) to his furniture was bought and paid for through money he had acquired doing various odd jobs he took around the neighborhood. In school he worked twice as hard as anyone else, not just in academics, but in athletics as well. Day in and day out he pushed himself, striving for greatness, to show the Dursley's that their misguided concepts of him were wrong, to show everyone that he was not just some child who couldn't look after himself, to make his parents proud of him.

Most importantly, he did it for himself. To prove to himself that he was different, unique, better.

It should be no wonder then, that Harry did not define himself as a child. As far as he was concerned, he did everything that an adult did and then some, therefore, he was an adult in all but age.

"I guess I'm just not like most people my age," Harry replied mildly.

"Zat you are not," Perennelle looked amused. "Zen again, I do not know many people, adult or ozzewise who would 'ave risked zeir lives and killed two 'umans to save a vampire."

Harry winced as he remembered what he had done to rescue the girl. He wasn't particularly bothered that he had killed. He had already killed Quirrel and that was much more violent and brutal than what happened to those two men. Plus they had deserved it for trying to desecrate the dead as they had. Still, it had been a messy affair and not one he had fully thought through when committing it.

"Wait." Harry eyed the woman with furrowed brows as he realized there was something wrong with her statement. "How did you know I killed two humans? I don't remember telling you or Master Flamel that."

"It was in zis mornings newspaper," Perennelle showed Harry the front page, which had a headline of 'Dangerous Animal Possibly on the Loose!' in big, bold print, along with a picture showing the two men who had been killed. "It says 'ere zat a strange beast with claws killed two men last night. Zese men were known mercenaries and rumors speculate zat zey were smuggling an illegal and dangerous animal when it got loose and killed zem." Her eyes gleamed triumphantly. "You are an animagus, are you not?"

Harry rubbed the back of his neck, trying not to show how impressed he was that she had come to such a conclusion. Most people would not have figured it out with so little information.

Then again, she was over six hundred years old. It shouldn't be that much of a surprise that she caught onto things quicker than most people.

"Guilty as charged."

"What iz your animal form, if you don't mind me asking?"

"A Jaguar with black fur and white fur in the shape of a lightning bolt right here," Harry pointed to his forehead, where his scar could be seen clearly visible beneath the fringe of his bangs.

"Fascinating." Perennelle looked impressed. "I myself do not possess ze ability to turn into an animagus. Neither does Nicolas."

Harry would admit that he preened a bit under the praise. There was just something about the woman that made him feel good about himself when she praised him. He suspected it had something to do with the male's need to impress females. It was supposedly something all men were genetically inclined to do no matter the age.

"Anyways, I zink I shall leave now zat you are 'ere to watch over 'er."

Perennelle stood up and began making her way out of the room. She reached the door before Harry decided to ask the question that had been on his mind since the day they first met.

"Madam Perennelle?"

Said woman turned around to face Harry, a single, delicate eyebrow raised in curiosity.

"I was just wonder. You're... you've been around for a while," Harry quickly corrected. If there was one thing he learned from Misses Crawft, it was that you never, under any circumstances, ever, mention a woman's age. Considering Perennelle was over six hundred years old, that small rule became more important by a factor of ten. "Yet I couldn't help but notice that you still have a French accent."

"And you are wondering why I still 'ave it?" She asked, amused. When he nodded, she smiled at him, showing her pearly white teeth. "I 'ave not gotten rid of my accent because Nichlas finds it sexy, of course."

Harry blanched.

He wished he hadn't asked.

XoX

Harry Potter swept into Gringotts with the walk of a man who was there with a purpose. He was wearing some of his new clothes, an Yves Saint Laurent business suit consisting of a black, double breasted jacket, black flat front pants, a dark green bordering on black collared shirt, Blake Derby shoes in black leather and a black belt with his traditional wand holster attached to it. He looked decidedly muggle (aside from the wand holster), which brought many stares from a good number of witches and wizards who were at Gringotts that day, but since Harry was here for business, he felt a business suit would be best.

Walking up to one of the empty teller booths, Harry spoke immediately and without waiting for the goblin to ask him to state his purpose.

"I have a meeting with Director Ragnok at half past nine."

The goblin in front him, a shorter than average goblin with no hair and several sunspots, looked up at him with irritated eyes.

"Name?"

"Harry Potter."

"Very well. Wait right here."

With an annoyed grunt, the goblin hopped off the stool he had been sitting on and walked over to the door that would lead to the offices where goblin's specifically assigned to look after the vaults of certain families worked.

Harry paid no more attention to the goblin as he disappeared behind the door, nor did he pay attention to the curious stares he was getting. He instead practiced his breathing exercises and cleared his mind. A few minutes later, the goblin came back through the door and bade him to follow.

Director Ragnok was sitting in the same position Harry last saw him in, making the young boy wonder if the goblin had even moved from that spot.

Sitting down in the chair just as Director Ragnok looked up from his

paperwork, Harry began to once again speak without prompting, getting straight to the point of this meeting.

"Have your people been able to insert themselves into HSBC Holdings?"

"They have," he said. Harry nodded. He didn't question how they managed to do such a thing when they were goblins, but he assumed there was some kind of magic involved.

"Last yearly earnings were fifteen percent of the accounts holdings."

"I know," Ragnok leaned back in his seat, placing his elbows on the desk and locking his fingers together in front of his face. "I saw the statements you sent. Not bad earnings for only a year. While it could have been better, it could have also been worse."

"Quite," Harry said with a nod. "And what of the information I gave you on the muggle stock market?"

"I've read through it," the goblin director allowed. "I'll admit, this stock market is a rather ingenious way of making more money. Those muggles came up with a good idea when they made it."

"Since you've seen my bank statements, you should know how I managed to make that money."

"By buying out stocks for two different companies that are in competition with each other when they are at their lowest prices, then selling them when they are at an all time high," Ragnok's feral smile set Harry at unease. He knew it did not mean anything, that was just the way goblins smiled when they were pleased, but it was still unsettling. "Yes, I saw that too. You've got impressive instincts."

"Thank you," Harry accepted the compliment with a nod. Compliments from goblins to wizards were rare, so receiving one just went to show Harry how impressed Ragnok was with his business acumen.

Not that he didn't have a reason to be. Harry had, after giving much thought, come up with a genius way to make money.

And if there was one thing goblins loved, it was making more money.

Muggles were in a new age. If the late seventeenth century was the start of the Industrial age for muggles, then the past two decades or so could easily be considered the start of the Technological age. Each day people were coming up with new technologies, or improved versions of old technological ideas. In particular, computers had come a long way, changing from those large, unwieldy things that only militaries or the super wealthy could own, to smaller computers that can fit comfortably at a desk and were only around two hundred and fifty pounds.

And it was with these technological wonders that Harry found his means of making the most money.

Apple and Microsoft were two companies that were constantly competing with each other to make better and better products. Every year one or both companies would come out with a new computer that set or raised the standard. Every year each company would try to outdo the other, creating a constant competition between the two to see who could come up with a better product.

Competition in business was defined as "the effort of two or more parties acting independently to secure the business of a third party by offering the most favorable terms". Essentially, Apple and Microsoft were the two or more parties, while various consumers world wide were the third party whose favor they were trying to gain.

There has always been debate on whether or not competition is actually good for business. Many business theorists have argued about the profitability of competition between two businesses, some stating that an increase in competition created more products, services and technologies to give consumers greater selection and better products; while others claimed it led to wasted effort (Duplicated products) and increased cost.

Harry had actually read many people's work on business economics. It wasn't as interesting as history or science, and nowhere near as exciting as magic, but it had at least given him something to read that would help him in the future.

However, what he was interested in was not whether or not competition in business increased productivity or lead to wasted effort. All that mattered to Harry was what it could do for him.

By buying out stocks from one company when they were at a lower price, then selling them when they reached their highest (typically this happened several months after a new product was released before the hype over it wore off), followed by buying out the stocks of the other company while they were at their lowest and repeating the process, Harry increased the money owned in his bank account substantially.

So far, his plan had worked beautifully.

Producing a sheet of paper from within the front pocket of his business suit, Harry slid the paper across the desk to Director Ragnok. As the Director of Gringotts grabbed the paper and unfolded it to read the contents, Harry began speaking once more.

"That list contains several companies I want to begin investing in and a few more I wish to start buying stocks for within the muggle world. As you now have people inside of the bank my account is located in, I'll leave the act of actually investing to them."

In most circumstances he would never do this, he preferred doing things himself, but Harry was going to be very busy this year making waves in wizarding society. His first year at Hogwarts had been him getting his feet wet, so to speak, but now was the time to really begin integrating himself into society as a whole.

However, in order to do this, he needed time. Time to make plans, time to meet people important to society. He wanted to hire Andromeda full time in an advisory roll, which would take up more of his time if she took the position, and that wasn't even going into his schooling and other endeavors. In short, he needed to allocate certain jobs to other people in order to have enough time to accomplish everything he wanted.

He wouldn't always be able to use a time turner after all.

"I also want to begin making plans to start a business in wizarding society," Harry said, getting Director Ragnok's full attention once more.

"Oh?"

"Yes," Harry tapped his left index finger against the armrest of his chair. "I want to get into the potions industry by selling improved versions of standard potions for a cheaper price than most stores. Doing so should bring in more business and increase sales."

"And having the name Harry Potter attached to your store will no doubt increase the amount of customers you acquire," Director Ragnok added, nodding his head as he thought of where Harry was going.

"There is that too." Truthfully, Harry had not really been thinking in terms of how using his name could increase customers, but it was a good idea nonetheless, and there was no need to inform Director Ragnok he had not actually thought of that.

"Hmm..." Director Ragnok placed a hand under his chin as a thoughtful look crossed his face. "There is a lot that goes into owning a business, especially one that caters to selling potions. It's not just a matter of needing to buy property and hire hands to make and sell potions. There is a legal process you have to go through. You need to get several licenses from the Ministry, one that allows you to own property and one that allows you to sell potions. It's a tedious process that wastes a lot of time and effort. It is also typically required for someone opening a potions shop to have a NEWT in potions and arithmancy."

Which would explain why there were so few potion shops these days. Harry had managed to learn through the grapevine that very few people passed Snape's NEWT level classes. Those who did were generally Slytherin's who didn't actually have an interest in potions and were taking the class because they knew Snape would go easy on them.

"I could probably waver much of the process by... donating some money to the Ministry," Harry murmured thoughtfully. He didn't like the idea of bribing to get what he wanted, but he would if he had no other options. "Or perhaps I could ask for a few favors." The world ran on favors. You do something for someone else, and in return they do something for you. Tit for tat. You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. That sort of thing.

"If you can get the licenses I can get the property," Director Ragnok said.

"But you have to get the license first. Without it, it won't matter if I buy the property or not, you won't be able to actually do anything with it."

"Then it looks like I have work to do," Harry stood up, preparing to leave. "Have your people begin investing in those companies. When I get the licenses, I'll send you a letter."

XoX

Harry Potter sighed in relief when he found himself standing outside of Gringotts. Talking business like that for however long he had been in there was tiring, incredibly so. While he knew quite a bit about economics and business thanks to his reading, he had not realized just how much effort truly went into creating a business and investing money.

It was a lot of work to be sure.

Lifting up his right arm, Harry looked down at his watch to see that it was half past noon. His meeting with Director Ragnok had started at half past nine, which meant he had been sitting in that room discussing business for three whole hours.

His rumbling stomach reminded Harry that he had yet to eat lunch.

Deciding to have something at the Leaky Cauldron instead of going back to the Durlsey's where it would take an extra fifteen minutes to make his own food, Harry began making his way into the streets of Diagon Alley.

As always, Diagon Alley was very crowded. As one of only three places where the magical community gathered to buy and sell their wares in Britain, it was always busy, with people constantly coming and going. Harry was very thankful that his natural grace and athleticism had been enhanced by his jaguar animagi form or he probably would have been knocked down several times already.

"Hey! Is that Harry?"

While walking through the throng of people, his ears managed to pick out the sound of his name being called by a very familiar voice above the loud noises that penetrated the afternoon crowd. Spinning around, Harry

tried to find the source of the voice.

"It is! Hey, Harry!"

Make that two sources. Standing over by a set of chairs surrounding a table at Florean Fortescues were none other than Tracey Davis and Lisa Turpin along with who Harry recognized as Tracey's father and mother.

A tiny smile work itself onto his face. Gliding through the crowd, Harry quickly made it over to the table where he was practically jumped on by an over excited Tracey.

"Harry!"

Harry couldn't help but laugh as Tracey tried her best to squeeze his internal organs into paste via her hug. It had not been that long since he had last seen his friends, just a little over three weeks, but he could understand why she was like this. It felt like much longer.

He supposed that old saying about absence in the face of time making the heart grow fonder had something going for it after all.

"It's good to see you, Trace," Harry replied to her greeting after she finished trying to see how thin she could make him with her hug. As she took a step back, he got his first good look at her.

Not much had changed with Tracey since the last time he had seen her. She had grown maybe a centimeter or two at most and her hair was just a bit longer. She wasn't wearing it in a pony tail like she usually did, allowing it to fall down her back in gentle curls and frame her face.

She also looked less conflicted then when he had last seen her. He supposed that meant whatever troubling thoughts she had been thinking were resolved. Harry was curious, but felt it best not to dredge up possibly painful and troubling thoughts.

Tracey was also wearing muggle clothing, tight blue jeans and a green T-shirt. This was the first time he had seen her (or any other witch) in muggle clothing, which may have had something to do with them only seeing each other at Hogwarts and when they were getting fitted for their

robes.

It would make sense to see her in muggle clothes though. Tracey was a half-blood. Her mother was a muggleborn witch, therefore it stood to reason she was a bit more impartial towards muggle clothing than wizards clothing.

"You look nice," Harry complimented. While his compliment earned him a slightly pink face from Tracey, that was secondary to the large grin she sported.

"I know," she was replied in a faux haughty voice that sounded like she was trying to mimic Perennelle but couldn't quite get it. It was kind of funny, if he were honest. Tracey then looked him up and down and raised an eyebrow. "Speaking of looking nice, what's up with the fancy getup?"

"Ah..." Harry wondered why he felt embarrassment at being called out on his clothing. Really, he had no reason to. Was it because everyone else was dressed so casually while he looked like a muggle barrister? "I just got finished meeting with Director Ragnok. We were talking business so..."

"You decided to wear a business suit," Tracey shook her head in amusement. "Geez, Harry. You look like a kid trying to play car salesman."

A small scowl crossed Harry's face.

"I do not. It's important to look the part as much as it is to play the part. When a meeting for a business transaction it's just as important to look professional as it is to sound professional."

"Right, right," Tracey waved her hand airily, as if waving off a bug. "I think you just like trying to look all smart and stuff, Mister big shot."

Harry frowned for a moment, before deciding he was going to ignore Tracey, her snickering, and her parents snickering as they watched him interact with their daughter. He instead turned his attention to Lisa. Their greeting was much more subdued than Tracey's enthusiastic glomping.

"Hey, Lisa. How has your summer been so far?"

"Good. Well, mostly good." When Harry raised an eyebrow at her answer, Lisa made an annoyed gesture. "Just the same old problems. I've been having to deal with my sister and she can be a bit... trying as you know, but I've had to deal with her every year so it's not like I don't have experience with it."

"Ah," Harry nodded in understanding. "She's been giving you trouble?"

"No more than usual."

Which was Lisa speak for 'she's the most annoying person in the world, but there is nothing I can do about that'.

"I see," Harry said. "Well, I hope things get better." Lisa snorted, letting her know her thoughts on that. Meanwhile, Harry looked over at the two adults, feeling a tad sheepish that he had not greeted them first as was proper in pureblood society. "Mister and Misses Davis. It's a pleasure to see you two again."

"The pleasures all ours," Misses Davis said, grinning as Harry gave her a proper pureblood greeting after shaking Mister Davis' hand. "Would you care to join us?"

Harry only needed a moment to think about it. He was hungry, that much was true. But it had been over three weeks since he saw any of his friends and, while he might not admit to it out loud, he had missed them.

Not as much as he had missed Lisa maybe, but he had missed seeing them and talking to them.

"I would, thank you."

Harry sat himself down next to Tracey and Lisa, both of whom had an ice cream sundaes in front of them. From the scent coming off them, he guessed that Tracey's was chocolate fudge with mint and Lisa's was white raspberry cheesecake. He also noticed their toppings, Tracey's ice cream had so much whip cream on it that it almost looked like the entire bowl was filled with the stuff. Lisa seemed to have taken a more spartan

approach, sprinkling only a little bit of chopped nuts and sprinkles on hers.

"Do you want some ice cream?" asked Mister Davis. Harry shook his head.

"I'm not much of a sweets fan," Harry admitted. Sweets were bad for people's health. Too much sugar. And that was not going into what they did to your teeth. "And I haven't had lunch yet."

"If you'd like I could grab you a sandwich?" Misses Davis suggested, causing Harry to blink at how accommodating she was. It wasn't like he hadn't had people be like that to him before. Misses Crawft did the same thing. But he was well acquainted with Lisa's mother. He hardly knew Tracey's.

Still, best to be polite and accept the offer.

"Thank you. If it's not too much trouble, could you get a turkey sandwich with lettuce, tomatoes, olive oil with a vinaigrette dressing and flax seed with no cheese?"

Misses Davis looked amused at his very specific specifications as she stood up. "I'll see what I can do," she promised, and then she was off.

"That woman," Mister Davis shook his head fondly before he went back to reading the newspaper in his hands.

Harry looked at Lisa and Tracey.

"So what are you two doing here?"

"You mean aside from hanging out?" asked Tracey, giving him a wry grin. Harry rolled his eyes.

"Yes, I kind of figured that," Harry said a bit dryly. "I mean, did you two just come here for ice cream? Or are you shopping too?"

"We did do some window shopping," Lisa admitted.

"But we mostly came here for the ice cream," Tracey added shamelessly as she dug into her sundae, moaning in delight as she took what looked to be her first bite of the day.

"I don't think Hermione would agree with you on that," Lisa said with an amused smirk. Harry blinked.

"Hermione's here?"

"Yeah," Tracey grinned. "She's still inside Florean's though." A snicker escaped her lips. "She's been in their for the past four minutes. Me thinks she's having a bit of trouble."

As Tracey pointed into the shop, Harry looked over his shoulder and saw that Hermione was indeed inside the store. She was with her parents, who were standing on either side of her and looking at the girl with a mixture of amusement and exasperation. Hermione herself was staring intently at the glass case filled with different kinds of ice cream, the thumb of her right hand being bitten on as she surveyed her choices.

Knowing Hermione, she probably wanted to try every flavor but her parents had told her she could only get one and was now having trouble deciding which flavor she wanted to get.

Harry was just surprised her parents were letting her eat ice cream at all, seeing how they were dentists.

"She wanted us to spend most of our time at Flourish and Blotts, but I shot that down as soon as I could." Tracey seemed quite proud of herself for that accomplishment. Lisa and Mister Davis just shook their head. "Can you believe her? Wanting to spend all our time looking at books? Ugh, I felt myself getting bored just looking at that place from a distance."

"There's nothing wrong with reading," Lisa frowned.

"Of course you'd say that," Tracey rolled her eyes. "You're a Ravenclaw, and a history buff. You're, like, a super nerd."

"I should probably take offense to that," Lisa muttered without any real heat. She had gotten used to Tracey putting her foot in her mouth by

now. They all had.

"But you don't because you love me, right?"

Lisa shook her head, but smiled all the same. "I see why Daphne's always ragging on you," she said, making Tracey pout and cross her arms over her chest.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing, nothing."

"I'm surprised you guys managed to get Hermione to come out here," Harry said, shaking his head in slight amusement at their antics. It seemed almost like Lisa was channeling her inner Daphne for dealing with Tracey. Only she didn't have nearly enough bite to her words and was nowhere near as sarcastic. And she wasn't making fun of Tracey.

"Wasn't that hard," Tracey shrugged as she took another spoonful of ice cream and brought to her mouth. "We just sent her a letter asking if she wanted to come."

"Don't speak with your mouth full, Tracey."

Tracey swallowed her ice cream before sending her dad a sheepish look. "Right, sorry dad."

"We actually sent letters to everyone," Lisa informed him. "Or Tracey did, she's the one who wanted everyone to get together."

"Blaise is still in Italy though," Tracey told Harry. "I think he'll be there until the end of next month. Neville would have come, but I was told his gran was doing something special for him this week due to his good grades. Daphne is, well, I don't think I need to tell you why she couldn't come."

Harry nodded. Knowing Daphne, she probably didn't want to leave Astoria alone with their father. If Harry had a father like that, he wouldn't want to leave his sister alone with him either. If he had a sister that is.

"Anyways, Terry said he was doing something this weekend. I think it has

something to do with stars and telescopes." She shook her head, as if wondering why her friend decided astronomy was more important than her. "Susan and Hannah are out of the country as well. They're in the States, I think. And you," she pointed an accusing finger at him, "never even bothered giving me a reply."

"You sent me a letter?" Harry blinked. "That's news to me."

"Wait. Are you saying you didn't get my letter?"

"Well, no," Harry frowned. "In fact, I haven't received any mail in the past three days. I haven't even gotten the Daily Prophet either." Which he had subscribed to before even beginning his first year at Hogwarts. Since then he had received the Daily Prophet Newspaper, well, daily. At least he had until three days ago, when he had stopped receiving them. He had thought something was wrong with his subscription, but if what Tracey was saying was true, there may be another reason.

The only thing he could think of for not receiving his mail was that someone was blocking his letters. He would have to look into this. And if that was the case, he would need to give whoever was blocking him from receiving mail divine retribution for not allowing him to keep up with his friends and what was going on in wizarding society.

For now though, he should probably come up with an alternate means of allowing his friends to write to him.

Getting out a sheet of paper, Harry quickly wrote down the address to Andromeda's business, asked Mister Davis to duplicate it (he couldn't use magic in public after all), then handed both sheets to Lisa and Tracey.

"If what you just said is true there might be a problem with my mail," he said when they both gave him strange looks. "Just send your letters to this address and I'll get them."

"Ok, sure," Tracey stuffed the address in the side pocket in her jeans as Lisa carefully folded it and did the same.

"It's very strange that you're not receiving the Daily Prophet," Mister

Davis mused. "Seeing how they're a newspaper company, the more newspapers the sell the higher their ratings go." He looked down at his Daily Prophet paper, causing Harry to once more do the same.

"Speaking of the Daily Prophet," Harry interrupted as he took a look at the paper. "Would you mind if I see the front page of yours?"

Mister Davis looked at him, then shrugged as he handed the young Potter heir the front page of his newspaper.

"Sure."

"Thank you."

"Why are you reading the newspaper when you could be talking to us?" asked Tracey as she wrinkled her nose at the newspaper like it had something foul smelling on it.

"Because of this," Harry pointed to the front page headline titled *'Movement for Muggleborn Rights Headed by Arthur Weasley'*, which spoke of the patriarch of the Weasley Clan trying to push a law that granted muggleborns more rights in wizarding society. According to the Daily Prophet, this law was being blocked by a number of old pureblood factions that were being headed by Lucius Malfoy who did not want muggleborns to gain a foothold in wizarding society and taint it with their 'muggle-like ideas'.

"Of course that's what got your attention," Tracey sighed. "You and your politics."

"I heard you had taken an interest in politics," Mister Davis looked at him with interest.

"Not so much an interest as I'm trying to stay abreast of current affairs and meet the big movers of the wizarding world," Harry amended. "As the heir to an Ancient and Most Noble house, as well as the last member of one of the Founding Five, I need to make sure that when I do enter the political arena, I am well connected and ready to face whatever challenges come my way."

That was why he was trying to make allies so early after entering the wizarding world. Right now, Harry Potter was big news. By meeting with people just after entering, he was using the momentum given to him by the hype he had from being the Boy-Who-Lived to his advantage. That was the heir to a powerful family was just the clincher.

"Makes sense," Mister Davis admitted. "I've never been too interested in politics myself, but I know that you would need to know that crap for when you get your house seat on the Wizengamot."

"Language dear," Misses Davis said with a pleasant voice as she set a plate with a turkey sandwich on it in front of Harry. Mister Davis winced when she patted him on the arm and sat down.

"Man, dad," Tracey shook her head in feigned disappointment. "Mum's got you whipped."

"I am not whipped," Tracey's dad exclaimed. The way he looked at his wife out of the corner of his eye did not help his case. "And you shouldn't speak to your father like that."

"Whatever," Tracey said in a dismissive fashion, waving her hand in the air. Mister Davis looked like he was ten seconds away from pouting, which caused Misses Davis to chuckle and give him a kiss on the cheek, which in turn caused Tracey to grin. "See? Whipped."

As she made a lashing motion with her hand and 'whipping' sounds with her mouth, Lisa and Misses Davis giggled while Mister Davis finally did begin pouting.

"I had hoped you would not get your mother's mouth," he said sullenly. "It seems my hopes were crushed."

"What was that dear?"

"N-Nothing."

Harry shook his head as he watched the husband and wife interact. Were all men he knew like this? Completely submissive to the whims of their wife? Harry vowed to never let himself be in a relationship with such a

controlling woman when he got married.

"Harry!?"

Turning his head, Harry saw Hermione rushing over to their table, her parents following behind her as she ran while trying not to spill her ice cream. There was a bright smile on her face as she stopped in front of their table.

A smile which turned into a frown as she looked at him. For a moment, Harry thought there was something wrong when her eyes roamed up and down his body. He hadn't gotten any crumbs on his clothes, had he? What if there was olive oil and dressing smeared all over his face? That would just be embarrassing.

Those thoughts were dashed as the next question came out of her mouth.

"Harry, why are you wearing a muggle business suit?"

As Lisa began to giggle, parents began to snicker, and Tracey started guffawing loudly enough to draw attention to their table from witches and wizards walking along the street, a red faced Harry vowed to never wear a business suit unless he absolutely had to ever again.

XoX

Following his lunch with Hermione, Lisa, Tracey and her parents, Harry found himself in a meeting with Andromeda Tonks. After learning that someone may or may not be blocking his mail, he had decided it would be prudent to inform his barrister of this, if for no other reason than because he had told his friends to forward their letters to him to her address.

"I swear, Harry, you are one of my most trouble prone clients," despite her words, Andromeda sounded more amused than angry or exasperated. "Wanting to sue a large number of companies, picking fights with Lucius Malfoy at the Ministry Ball and now this."

"I do apologize for doing this to you," Harry felt a bit sheepish as she laid

out everything he had done so far. When said it like that, it made him realize that most people would probably never do half the things he had done, much less in just a year. Even less at age eleven. "I couldn't really think of who else I would trust not to look through my mail and, well, if my mail is being blocked..."

"I understand," Andromeda said, holding up a hand to stop him from speaking. "Though I don't think your problem is someone blocking your mail."

"Why is that?"

"Because blocking your mail is impossible for anyone who is not your magical guardian," Andromeda stated, before elaborating for him. "The spell used to block mail is a very special spell created by the Ministry in order to keep certain people of high status from receiving mail from people who may mean them harm. In order for the spell to be performed on you, it must be done with the consent of your magical guardian."

"Which is Sirius Black, who is currently incarcerated in Askaban," Harry could see where this was going.

"Yes. Sirius Black was incarcerated in Askaban by the time you were sent to live with your relatives. Considering you have been receiving your mail daily until recently, it stands to reason he did not give consent to block your mail. Not that he could anyways. Only the Minister of Magic can visit him, and he would not do something that may put him at odds with the Boy-Who-Lived."

Harry frowned as he realized his first theory was wrong.

"If my mail isn't being blocked, then how come I'm not getting it?"

Andromeda looked pensive.

"This is just a thought, but I would hazard a guess and say that someone is intercepting your mail for some reason." She worried her lower lip as Harry gave her a startled look.

"Someone's intercepting my mail?" Harry didn't know whether to feel

shocked or angered at the audacity someone had to have to actually steal his mail. It wasn't just a matter of ethics, but a matter of cause, of motive. Why would someone want to steal his mail?

Could it be Voldemort? Possibly. Harry was not quite terrified, but certainly concerned by the thought that Voldemort might be going through his mail. It was definitely unsettling, especially given that he had been after the Philosopher's Stone during their most recent encounter.

Still, while he didn't discount the possibility of Voldemort learning that he actually had the stone in his possession for a time and was now hoping to find it via looking through his mail, he didn't think it feasible either. Right now Voldemort was nothing more than a wraith without a body, and while it was possible he had possessed someone else already, it was also unlikely. Right now he was weak, so unless someone willingly allowed him to possess them, it wouldn't be happening.

That left the question of who was intercepting his mail up in the air, which put him back at square one.

"Well," Andromeda tried to liven up the tense atmosphere her dropped bomb had created. "I wouldn't worry about that now. While not a perfect solution, you have found a way to still get your mail. In order for them to figure out which mail belongs to you, they would have to intercept all of my mail, which is impossible because I am a Barrister. There would be an investigation if they did." She tapped her chin with a long index finger and added. "And I doubt anyone would be able to figure out that you've been seeing me unless they follow you everywhere, which would be impossible unless they had the ability to watch you twenty-four seven. So, let's not worry about that for now."

Harry relaxed at Andromeda's words. She was right. He had come with a solution towards his mail problem, albeit, a temporary one. He could figure the rest out later, no matter how much it rankled him to leave this issue unresolved.

"Now, you'll be pleased to know that I have everything ready to begin our campaign against the companies using your name for their products." Harry perked up, causing Andromeda to smile. "I was actually going to

send you a letter. Good thing I didn't, eh?"

They both shared an uneasy chuckle. Neither wanted to think about what would happen if someone had intercepted that letter. That would have been a disaster to deal with.

"All that's left for you to do is give the ok," Andromeda continued. "Then I can begin my campaign."

"Is it possible for you to start at such a time that the first public apology is given the day after I go to Hogwarts?"

Andromeda chuckled as she seemingly read Harry's thoughts.

"Wanting to avoid the publicity?"

"Only partially," Harry answered with a shrug. "I just don't want to have my daily schedule interrupted by hungry reporters trying to convince me to give an interview. I would prefer it if I could simply send my response via mail instead of having to sit through several hours of someone asking me questions on my thoughts about other people using my name for their own profit."

Andromeda had a suggestion for that. "In that case, should you wish it, we could field all questions by predicting what people will be asking and coming up with prewritten answers before then?"

Thinking over the offer for a second, Harry nodded his head. "Good idea. That would save me a lot of trouble in the long run." Not to mention a lot of time, which Harry would be having very little of once he started Hogwarts again.

Gods he was going to miss that time turner. Such a useful device it was.

"In that case, I believe that concludes our business for now." Andromeda smiled as Harry stood up. Now that there was no more business to be done, her demeanor went from a professional barrister to that of a mother whose child happened to be someone as wily, excitable and accident prone as Nymphadora Tonks. "Would you like to stay for dinner?"

"Thank you for the offer," Harry inclined his head politely. "But I have to decline. I've made other dinner arrangements today."

Andromeda giggled, a little as a teasing grin crossed her face, both at his word choice and what it meant.

"Having dinner at your girlfriends house today?"

Harry groaned as he rubbed a hand over his face. Why did every older woman he knew think that he and Lisa were dating? They weren't dating! He was too young to think of something as inconsequential as romance, especially when there were more important things to be done!

Besides, Lisa was like his sister. Dating her would just be wrong.

"You... ugh, why is it that every woman I meet say things like this?"

"Maybe it's because you act like an old whipped husband responding to his wives every beck and call," Andromeda teased him some more. Great, first Katrina, then Perennelle and now Andromeda. Did all older women enjoy teasing him?

And he was not whipped! He wasn't!

...

...

Was he?

XoX

"Blood Runes, also known as Blood Seals to some, are used to bind someone's soul to an inanimate object. The iron in the blood will interact with the metal it's on, causing the metal and the Blood Rune to form a symbiosis, thereby ensuring that the soul is tied to the object rather than the body."

Nicolas Flamel paced back and forth in front of his student as he lectured Harry on yet another aspect of Alchemy that the young Potter heir had

never heard of.

He had to admit, it was a fascinating subject. Kind of sick and twisted, but fascinating nonetheless.

"There are a few positive effects for those who have had their soul bound. A person whose soul is bound to an inanimate object feels no pain, hunger, or fatigue, thus enabling them to perform immense physical feats. Also, as the person has no body, he or she can sustain more damage than normal humans, placing the person in a state of high invulnerability."

Now that Harry understood the basics of alchemy and could create his own transmutation circles, Nicolas Flamel had decided it was time to give him more knowledge on the subject of alchemy. Advanced knowledge. Forbidden knowledge.

"Of course, there are also negative effects as well. He or she has a weak point, the rune itself. If the rune is damaged in some way, the person's soul will start to fade from the object. This makes the protection of the blood rune the most important task of the bound soul. Sometimes, the person inside the object can start to question his or her own existence. This can be very dangerous to the person's mental health."

Harry felt a shiver course down his spine. While this subject was beyond interesting, he would not deny that the idea of having his soul bound to an inanimate object was frightening. The idea of never feeling pain or hunger or fatigue, while pleasant also came with an equal amount of negatives. He would not be able to feel, he would never be able to taste, he would never get to enjoy the act of sleeping for relaxations sake.

The worst part, Harry would admit, is that he would never be able to feel. The other two didn't sound as bad.

He would deny this to anyone who asked, but Harry had grown to like Lisa's hugs. It was an (un?)fortunate side effect of getting so many of them throughout the number of years he had known her.

"There is also an even greater danger to those who have had their souls bound; if one's soul is bound to an inanimate object for too long, the soul

and object will eventually start to repel each other. The person will start to experience moments of exhaustion, which causes that person's soul to disappear from the object. This can lead to the complete destruction of the soul as it slips away. This makes the blood rune only a temporarily effective technique."

"The process is relatively simple. The practitioner must draw a rune in blood on an inanimate metal object, which will bind the iron in the blood. Typically speaking, runes are often drawn on things like armor."

As Flamel finally finished his lecture, Harry decided it was time to give voice to his thoughts on what he learned.

"It doesn't sound to me like the benefits of having your soul bound to an object outweigh the costs."

"Of course it doesn't," Flamel chuckled. "This method of binding was not used as any form of reprieve or reward. It was punishment dealt for people who had committed a capital offense. Back during the Founder's Era and even during the time of ancient Greece, binding souls to objects were done for those who had committed the most heinous of crimes. These criminals would have their souls bound and a slave rune placed upon them to ensure they would obey their master's every whim. They were normally used as guards for high profile peoples and places."

"This process has been around for that long?" He had not realized such advancements had been made so far back.

"Well, the process itself is not that difficult," Flamel shrugged. "It's just that people were so disgusted by the idea of it that all knowledge on how to do it was banned by the ICW."

Which would explain why Flamel knew of it, but no one else. Or no one else who was willing to try and write it in a book at least.

"So the Founders used this technique as well..." Harry mused to himself.

"Naturally. It's a very stable technique if used correctly, and creates an inexhaustible guard force. How do you think all those suits of armor came to be capable of movement?"

Harry blinked.

"That would make sense," his eyes glazed over in thought. "I had always thought it was some form of permanent animation charm, but they were always just a little too... lifelike for that, a little too animated. I sometimes wondered if there were actually people in those suits of armor."

"Technically there are," Flamel said dryly. "They're just not in any position to talk."

"True."

"In either event, what the Founder's did was more than just binding souls to suits of armor," Nicolas continued on this tangent for a moment. "As I said before, souls will fade eventually as the object and soul repel each other. To solve this problem, I suspect a more permanent binding ritual was used after the souls were initially bound."

"Though I will admit, I have no idea what ritual the used. My passion is alchemy, not magic rituals."

Harry nodded his head as he went through everything he was told. It was something of a startling revelation to learn that Four of the most looked up to wizards in British history, those who had pioneered the way for magical learning, had actually done something most people in this day and age would consider some of the darkest type of magics.

It also went to show just how different this age was from the Founder's time. Such practices may have been accepted two thousand years ago, maybe even as far back as six hundred years ago, but in this day and age magic like the Blood Rune would have earned a one way ticket to Askaban.

A knock on the door startled Harry from his thoughts. He and Flamel looked over at the door to see Perennelle enter the room, looking absolutely stunning as always.

"Penny dear, is something wrong?" asked Flamel, concerned. Perennelle rarely ever came into his alchemy lab. Usually, the only times she would enter was when she had decided either he or Harry had spent too much

time in their and needed to get out for some fresh air.

Today's lecture had been relatively short. They had only been in there for about an hour give or take a few minutes.

"Nozzing is wrong," Perennelle assured her husband with a smile that showed her pearly whites. "Unless you consider our guest waking up." Harry blinked in surprise as she turned to him. "She has requested to see you."

"Me?" Harry blinked again, dumbstruck. "Why?"

"Why, to thank 'er savior, of course," Perennelle replied with a lilting giggle that no woman over six hundred years old should possess. No woman over twenty should possess that kind of laugh. And just why did her voice send such pleasant tingles through him?

"Ah, well," Harry looked uncertain for a moment. "I guess, I should, go see her then, yes?"

"Yes, you should." Perennelle looked amused by his uncertainty. Harry was sure she would tease him later. Every woman he had met over the age of twenty so far seemed to enjoy messing with him via teasing lately. He just wished he understood why.

"Right, well..." Harry turned to Flamel and bowed slightly. "... thank you for the lesson."

"Oh, no worries, no worries," Flamel also looked amused. Harry was sure that man would be taunting him later too. Stupid old man who didn't look a day over twenty. "You should go. Wouldn't want to keep your fair damsel waiting now, would you?"

Harry's right eye twitched slightly, but thanks to his Occlumency skills that was the only sign of his irritation. Offering another nod, he quickly left the alchemy lab and made his way to the room where the vampire girl he had rescued resided.

She was inside, just as Harry expected her to be. She was also wide awake.

Standing over by the window and looking out as sunlight streamed in through the glass (which had Harry wondering if she really was a vampire. Weren't they supposed to be vulnerable to sunlight?) was the girl he had rescued.

The first thing his ocular senses decided to register was that her clothes, if such a definition could be applied to what she was wearing, were about as close to indecent as you could possibly get while still keeping all the necessities covered.

A pair of slinky black shorts covered her bottom, but did absolutely nothing to disguise how her small, firm and shapely her derriere truly was. It also did nothing to mask her long, lean and shapely legs that were currently on full display for Harry's underage eyes. Up top was a camisole, a sleeveless undergarment for women that normally extended to the waist.

This one did not.

Extending only to the mid riff, exposing her back enough that Harry could see the supple muscles hidden under her pale flesh, the camisole in question was black chiffon over stunning leavers of lace and silk. It was very sheer, translucent enough for Harry to see through most of it quite easily. The fact that her milky white skin contrasted greatly with the black of the camisole did absolutely nothing to help mask her skin from him. Harry could see quite clearly the flesh underneath her clothing.

Then she turned around and, for some reason he could not even begin to fathom, Harry felt himself sucking in a sharp intake of breath.

He had stared into this face many times in the past two days. Even if he had not, he had already committed every single detail of her face to memory. Or so he thought. What he was seeing now left him questioning whether or not this was the same girl he had rescued from those mercenaries exactly two and a half days ago.

Her face was just as flawless and pale as he remembered. She still had that very princess-esque look he had seen when they first met. But those were the only similarities he could see between this girl and the one he had saved from certain death.

Her eyes, those silvery blue orbs that glowed with an unearthly luminescence were staring at him with a half lidded gaze, piercing him, devouring him. Harry had often been told he had very piercing eyes. How when he looked at people, it was like he was looking right through them. This was similar, yet different. Oh so very different. Harry did not feel like this girl was piercing him, but that she was stripping him with her gaze.

That gaze sent a tingle through his spine all the way down to his toes that was strangely pleasant yet utterly terrifying at the same time for reasons he could not fathom.

Her lips, those pouty, dark red cupid bow lips had curved into a delicate smirk that made his legs feel strangely like jelly. It was a most unpleasant feeling, but at the same time, Harry could not help but think he could stare at those lips for the rest of his life.

He wondered how something as simple as a smirk could have so much power over him.

"So you are the one who saved me from those Vatican goons," she spoke in English, surprisingly. It was heavily accented. Harry recognized it as Italian. Blaise's mother had a slight Italian accent.

Harry would have spoken, he should have spoken, but for some reason his mind was not working right now. He didn't know why. He didn't, but he wished he did, because that meant all he could do at the moment was nod like some kind of idiot.

"Hmm..."

The sound of oddly sensual thought snapped his mind to the present to see the girl was beginning to walk towards him. Harry, had his mind been working, probably would have run the moment he saw the girl begin walking, no, stalking towards him like some kind of apex predator. Well, she was a vampire. They counted as that, didn't they? In either case, while Harry's rational mind would have most likely told him to run in this situation, it was currently not working properly. It felt like someone had disconnected his logical thinking processes from the rest of his body.

"You are much younger than I had expected."

Such was his stunned state that he did not even react when she mentioned his age. She was standing right next to him now, his enhanced nose picked up her natural scent, a very pleasant smell that his olfactory senses could not properly identify but found... mouthwatering(?) nonetheless. Her strange smirk that had him feeling things he had never felt before growing just a bit as she raised her left hand.

Harry felt a strange shudder pass through his body as she cupped his cheek. Her hand was surprisingly warm (weren't vampires supposed to be cold due to lack of blood running through their veins? Then again, sunlight didn't effect her so perhaps conventional vampire knowledge really was just that inaccurate.) and very pleasant. Against his will, Harry found himself leaning into her touch.

"But then, that just makes what you did even more heroic," she continued. There was something strange about her voice, something that, like the rest of her so far, Harry could not identify. It seemed to speak to the more primal side of him, his more animalistic side. Her voice spoke of enticement, promising unfathomable pleasure with each word that passed through her lips.

Harry found his other cheek being cupped by another delicate and soft hand, moving his face and forcing him to make eye contact with the girl.

Killing curse green eyes met glowing silvery blue. The girl's smile had not changed, but there was something else about it that Harry could not figure out.

It would come to him in time, but not until he was older.

"My name is Selene Gallio Dracul," she told him, smiling. "And I am forever in your debt, my young hero."

Oh boy! This girl looks like Trouble with a capital T. What will Harry do now that this girl is a wake and seems to be, quite possibly, the most Dangerous person he will ever have to deal with yet? And just how is he going to deal with a super sexy vampire anyways?

I suppose you'll just have to find out next chapter.

Now before I end this, I would like to once again state how awesome you guys are. This last chapter received 184 reviews, making it my most reviewed chapter to date. I truly appreciate the love you have shown it, especially since I put in a lot of effort to make this story as top quality as I can.

Please be sure to give this chapter just as much love. Also, do not forget to check out my blog: Thoughts and Wonderings of a Fanfiction Writer, where I will answer any and all questions you guys have for me. I would also appreciate it if you guys were willing to join my blog. It doesn't mean you have to do anything, just click on the 'join this site' button under the peepulation page. I'm trying to see how many people I can get to join.

Thank you all very much, and have a pleasant day.

Lessons in Vampirism

Chapter 6: Lessons in Vampirism

"So you are the one who saved me from those Vatican goons."

From the moment I laid eyes on her, I knew there was something different about this girl. It wasn't just that she was outstandingly beautiful in a way that reminded me of a slightly darker version of those Princess' from those Disney movies Lisa loves to watch. Everything from her looks to the way she walked and talked set my heart racing in ways I couldn't even begin to comprehend.

"Hmm..."

Why? That was the question I wanted to ask. Why was it that this girls voice caused my heart to feel like it was beating a thousand miles per minute? Like there was a war drum in my chest? Why did my eyes seem to be incapable of deciding which part of her body I wanted to look at? Why did her scent intoxicate me so? And why did the alluring sway of her hips, the small movements her breasts made as she walked, and the smirk on her face set my body aflame like they did?

"You are much younger than I had expected."

At first, I thought it was some kind of magic. It was a logical conclusion, I like to think. How else could I explain this impossible... attraction I felt for the young female vampire I had inadvertently rescued from being used and killed?

"But then, that just makes what you did even more heroic."

It was only after several seconds of being in her presence that I realized there was no magic involved here. While I could feel magic coming from her, a lot of magic at that, none of it was being used. At least, none of it was being used on me. It was almost like all that magic was being channeled through her body in some way. Whatever the case was, I

knew that whatever her magic was doing, it was not effecting my body or mind in any way. Shape, or form.

"My name is Selene Gallio Dracul."

Whatever was happening to me had nothing to do with magic.

"And I am forever in your debt, my young hero."

It was all her.

XoX

Morning arrived as it was wont to do. As Sol began to rise on the skyline, bathing Terra in it's warmth, several rays of sunlight shone in through Harry Potter's window at number four Privet Drive. The young boy in question slowly opened his eyes to greet the coming of a new day.

Or at least, that is what he tried to do. Almost as soon as his eyes opened he was forced to shut them again, lest the rays of light burn his retina with how intense they seemed to be.

Rolling over on his side, Harry tried to turn away from the sunlight that found it's way into his room. It helped a little bit.

Not that such a thing mattered. He needed to get up anyways.

Slowly pushing himself into a sitting position, Harry swung his legs over the bed until his calves and feet were dangling off the edge. His hands raised up above his head, stretching as he let loose a gargantuan yawn while his vertebra cracked and popped from being stretched to its limits. Slowly, oh so slowly, Harry brought his hands back down, blinking several times as he did so as they came to rest on either side of his body.

Grumbling a bit, he pushed himself to his feet and began to gracefully stumble out of his room and into the restroom. Once there he turned on the water to the shower, making sure the water was cold, then stepped in.

The cold water had the nice effect of cooling off his unusually hot body

temperature, though it seemed to do little else. Harry grumbled a bit more before pointing his finger behind him at the shampoo bottle.

It was only hardened reflexes honed through years of training and sparring with Master Wei that allowed him to dodge the bottle that came flying at him at higher speeds than he was used to, almost hitting him in the face. As it was, the bottle ended up hitting the opposite end of the shower.

Kneeling down, Harry grabbed onto the bottle with an irritated expression. He then brought it up to his face and took a good look at the bottle itself when he realized something.

"Conditioner?"

Frowning a bit, Harry turned his head to look back at the small corner where the bottle had come from. There, standing in its usual place, was the shampoo bottle. He looked back at the bottle of conditioner in his hands, then, with even more grumbling, walked over to the corner, sat the bottle of conditioner down, grabbed the bottle of shampoo, then began to lather up his hair.

As he finished washing his hair, Harry let go of the shampoo, expecting it to float back over to the corner it had been sitting in before.

Which was why he was surprised when it dropped to the ground with a loud thud that rang loudly due to the room's acoustics.

Looking at the shampoo for several seconds like it was some kind of foreign object he had never seen before, Harry eventually bent down and grabbed the bottle, putting it back where it belonged.

What followed was Harry's body automatically reacting in the way it usually did for his morning routine. Despite what had happened with his last few attempts, Harry pointed over to the bar of soap.

It should be no surprise that the soap practically flew from where it was situated, nearly hitting Harry in the face before his hand shot out and managed to catch it.

With a small, discontent frown, Harry finished cleaning up. He lathered his body with soap then rinsed it off. By now steam was beginning to rise from his body as his magic reacted to the cold water and began heating him up like it usually did when his temperature was too cold. With a small sigh, the young Potter heir finished his shower by turning off the water and stepping out.

Now dripping wet, Harry began walking over to the mirror. Once again, instincts kicked in and Harry pointed at the towel, which soon came flying off the rack and this time the object ended up smacking him in the face. Giving an irritated grunt, he pulled the towel off, absently glad that at least it was a towel his face had been smacked with and not a bar of soap or bottle of conditioner.

Looking at himself in the mirror, Harry took note of the dark bags under his eyes. It was the price he paid for using the time turner to go back eight hours in time every day for nearly a week. He wondered if this was what jet lag felt like when it was increased by a factor of ten.

Shaking such thoughts off as inconsequential, Harry stumbled his way back into his bedroom.

The first thing he did upon entering his room was open his trunk to the potions compartment and grab one of his modified pepper up potions. It would give him exactly eight hours of energy, enough to get through half his day, without suffering from a serious crash that standard pepper up potions caused. It was only a temporary solution, but it would have to do for now.

As steam began pouring out of his ears, Harry got himself dressed in a pair casual clothes, plain jeans and a t-shirt. He then grabbed his wand, his alchemy notebook filled with all the transmutation circles he had sketched out, his mother's wand, and finally, the portkey Nicolas Flamel had created for him.

"Alchemy."

Harry was coming to greatly dislike almost all forms of magical transportation, apparition being the one exception it seemed. The floo network tended to shoot him out like a muggle rocket fired from a

bazooka, which was neither pleasant nor graceful, and now he had to deal with portkeys, which felt like a hook was latching onto him behind his navel and literally yanking him into a dizzying array of lights and color. Harry Potter would not be at all surprised if this was what most people saw when they were under the effects of hallucinogenics. It was that unpleasant.

Thankfully the trip only lasted for several seconds. Not so thankfully, Harry still couldn't quite compensate for the sudden appearance of ground underneath his feet and stumbled slightly before righting himself.

"Good morning, amore."

He was not alone. Standing in the entryway to the Flamel Manor was none other than Selene Gallio Dracul, the vampire he had rescued that had just woken up the day before. The one who made his body feel the most unusual, unwelcome, but strangely pleasant sensations he had ever experienced to date.

The one who was currently standing so close to him that he actually jumped back in shock. How had she gotten so close? He had not even seen her move!

"Did you sleep well?" asked Selene as she moved forward again to close the distance between them. She grabbed onto his left arm, her right arm lacing through it while her left hand lightly caressed his forearm. The skin contact sent a jolt through his body, a tingle that traveled up his arm, down his back all the way to his toes. So intense was the feeling that he did not protest when she led him out of the entryway and up the double helix staircase.

"I slept... well," even with his mind somewhat on the fritz, his body was pre-programmed well enough to respond to such a simple inquiry without needing to really think about it. Then he remembered it was common courtesy to return the question. "And you? How did you sleep?"

Selene offered him that smirk that had done him in so easily last night. Even now, it still effected him for some reason.

"I slept well, amore. Thank you for asking."

Harry was able to snap out of his fugue a little at her words. He frowned.

"Don't call me that."

"Why?" her smirk widened. "Do you not like it?" Harry would have answered, but at that moment Selene pressed her body against his.

Harry stiffened as he felt his arm become encased between two globes of flesh. He knew what they were. He had studied anatomy. But for some reason, knowing what they were did not make dealing with the fact that there were two nicely developing breasts being pressed against his arm.

"You are the one who rescued me," Selene continued as if she did not know what her actions caused. "The one who took responsibility for me and looked after me. Perennelle told me what you did. It was very heroic of you. You my hero. My amore."

The words that Harry wanted to say were there, they were on the tip of his tongue. Yet for some reason, he could not say them. It was like they had gotten lodged in the back of his throat.

When he finally did gain the ability to speak, it had nothing to do with her use of that strange petname.

"Selene, where are we going?" he asked, recognizing the hallway they were walking down. "This doesn't lead anywhere near the dining room." He had not had breakfast yet. With how difficult his workload was now, Harry had no desire to cook his own food. At the very least, he enjoyed having his breakfasts made for him by someone else.

"I thought we could use a change of venue," Selene answered him with her usual smirk.

Harry said nothing more, mainly because he did not know what to say. A few seconds later, he was led out onto a veranda overlooking one of several gardens surrounding the Flamel's home. It was, like the rest of the estate, built in a Renaissance style. The wall blocking off the area was made from stone and carved with vine shaped reliefs. The tables and chairs were very extravagant, with beautifully crafted inlays and made from a combination of crystal, polished steel and varnished wood.

There was food already on the table, showing that Selene had been preparing for his arrival before he had even come, maybe even before he had woken up.

Selene guided Harry over to the table, sitting him down on the chair situated in front of what Harry recognized as the food he normally ate at the Flamel's; six scrambled eggs, two pieces of turkey bacon, a bowl of assorted fruits with greek yogurt and a glass of orange juice. The young vampire sat on the opposite side in front of what Harry knew was the traditional Italian colazione; a cappuccino with a lot of foam, and assorted bread rolls with butter and jam.

For a moment, all was silent except for the sounds of utensils clinking against plates as the two ate their meals in silence. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry would look over at Selene every so often. The vampire girl did not seem bothered by this, or even to notice his constant looks. She just ate with the grace and dignity one would expect from some kind of noble.

"You have questions for me."

Ok, so she did notice.

"I do," Harry frowned. How had she managed to figure that out? Was he that transparent?

"Yes."

Harry's eye twitched, but he did his best to remain relatively calm. It would not do to let himself be bothered by this girl's words.

"You're going to have to teach me how you do that."

"It's not that hard," Selene shrugged, her eyes dancing with mischief and a smirk on her face. "It just takes practice. And you're very easy to read right now. Most people are when they're completely out of their element. They just don't do well when surprised or frustrated by something, and it's easy to guess what they're thinking because whatever poker face they have drops."

Another frown plastered itself on his face. He did not like to think his calm facade was so easily destroyed in the face of the unexpected. How could he be expected to thrive when meant with a surprise?

"You may ask your questions, if you wish. I won't bite." Selene smiled, her eyes going half lidded as she stared at him. Harry felt his heart beat quickening and blood begin rushing to his cheeks. "At least, not unless you want me to."

Harry tried to ignore the way his face felt flush at her words. He didn't know why they got to him so much. They shouldn't, so he did his best to ignore them.

"I noticed that you, well, that you don't seem affected by sunlight," Harry started, only to stop when Selene interrupted him.

"And you wish to know why I am not burning to dust and ashes right now?"

"Yes."

"Hmm..." Selene hummed to herself before taking a sip of her cappuccino. "In order to understand why I am not dying an agonizing death via sunlight, you must first understand us vampires."

She paused, her eyes growing a tad distant before focusing on him.

"Within vampire society there are three different kinds of vampires that you will find. The first are ghouls, humans who have been transformed into vampires by ingesting the blood of a vampire after having their blood ingested first. Ghouls are essentially mindless slaves who can do nothing but obey the commands of the one who turned them. This kind of vampire is incredibly weak against light. They are the ones who will usually burst into dust if introduced to sunlight."

Harry nodded his head as he followed along with her words. He could not help but find the knowledge she was giving him absolutely fascinating. How many people could even say they learned the truth about vampires straight from the source?

"The second kind of vampire are the dhampyrs, the most common type of vampire. They are vampires who have been born to a human and a vampire. Sunlight will not kill them, at least, not right away. The longer they stay out in the sun the weaker they become. If they stay out too long, the sun will weaken them to the point where they too will burn and crumble into ashes like their less intelligent counterpart, but they can survive in the light for a time."

"I take it there is another class of vampires?" inquired Harry. "One that you belong to?"

"That's right," Selene's fanged smirk sent shivers down his spine. "The last class of vampire are the pure-bloods, the rarest and most powerful of my kind. We are not affected as much by the vampires many weaknesses. Sunlight does not bother us, crosses and holy water only weakens us to a degree, silver is what we are weakest against, but even that will not outright kill us."

"This is because, in the most technical of terms, we are alive."

Leaning forward, Selene reached over and grasped one of Harry's hands in both of her own. The young heir to the Potter fortune's cheeks flushed red. It was unknown if he had any intention to speak when he opened his mouth, or if he was just gaping, for Selene continued right where she left off.

"You can feel how warm I am, yes?" she asked, causing Harry to absently nod. He could feel how warm she was, it was like his hand had been wrapped in a fleece blanket. "Vampires are usually very cold, because the blood in their bodies does not circulate. This is because their heart is not beating, it does not pump blood through their veins and arteries."

"Pure-bloods are different. While our hearts do not beat, our magic is very active within us. It's constantly acting like a heart would, regulating the flow of our blood and pumping it through our bodies. This is also why we do not need as much human blood as a normal dhampyr or a ghoul would."

"I see," Harry whispered, trying to ignore the feel of Selene's warm hands

covering his own. "You mentioned that pure-blood vampires are very rare."

"Extremely rare," Selene stated. "A pure-blood vampire is a vampire born of two vampires. Vampire births are exceedingly rare because we are not actually alive. How can a non living entity give birth to child? It shouldn't be possible according to the laws of nature, which explains why we are so rare. We exist outside of the natural order. Because of this, there are only twenty seven pure-blood vampires currently in existence, and many of them are very, very old." She gave him a smile filled with pride. "I happen to be the first pure-blood born within the last sixteen hundred years."

Now that, Harry found impressive. He knew from his research that there were rare magical species, some of which were said to be so rare most believed they were extinct like Griffins and others that were just exceedingly rare like the Phoenix. From what she was saying, pure-blood vampires were so rare they could actually be classified in the same category of scarcity that the Phoenix was.

"That's impressive."

Harry wondered just how many people had ever met a pure-blood vampire in recent times? The way Selene had made that comment about being the first pure-blood born within the last sixteen hundred years (1,600 years), made it sound like all the other pure-bloods were incredibly old. He imagined beings that old have probably shunned society by this point, preferring to live alone or with their covens or whatever.

"I know," Selene's voice was exceedingly smug. She was definitely proud of her status. Not that she didn't have a reason to be. "Of course, seeing as there are twenty seven of us, we're not quite the rarest creatures out there."

The look she gave Harry had his body stiffening instantly. It was that expression with the half lidded eyes and smirk that screamed predator he had seen when they first met.

"Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived. Well known throughout much of the world for surviving the supposedly unsurvivable killing curse," Selene's

thumb began caressing the back of his hand, sending all kinds of strange shivers through his body. "That's an impressive resume, amore. Not even a pure-blood such as myself would be able to survive getting hit with that curse."

The killing curse was soul magic. That was why it was unsurvivable, supposedly. It did not effect the body, but the bond between the body and the soul, literally severing that bond, much like the Fates of ancient Greek Mythology did when cutting someone's string of fate.

Harry had made sure to learn what he could of the Curse that had taken his parents from him and almost cost him his own life.

"It would probably be more impressive if I actually knew how I survived," Harry tried to keep from shuddering at her touch. The lingering warmth on his hand from her thumb was very distracting. "I was only one when it happened. Not exactly a genius capable of coming up with magical theories about how such a powerful spell could rebound like it did and leave me with nothing more than a scar."

It was one of those things that bothered Harry, the one thing that had always bothered him. He didn't know how he survived. Even after going through his memories a hundred times (and suffering from terrible nightmares each time), he was no closer to understanding how he managed to survive the killing curse, or why it rebounded off his forehead and hit Voldemort.

Of course, it might have been easier to come up with a theory if he actually had that part of his memories. All he remembered after Voldemort cast the curse at him was unfathomable pain in his forehead, then waking up at the Dursley's. The time in between those two moments were blank.

Not exactly a good observation for creating complex magical theories.

"Yes, I suppose it would be," Selene mused to herself. "Still, you cannot deny surviving something like getting hit with a killing curse square in the face by the Darkest wizard of the century is impressive on it's own."

"No, I suppose I can't," Harry agreed, though that was mainly out of

reflex, seeing how most of his attention was focused on their still conjoined hands. "Uh... Selene?" he asked, his face feeling very red right now. It got worse when she looked at him with that smile. "Do you think you could... let go of my hand?"

"Why?" Her smile grew as she held his with both hands now. "Do you not like this?"

"No, I do –" his eyes widened, then he shook his head. "I mean I don't." He tried to glare at her, but failed the moment their eyes met because his face began to feel quite hot. "Look, could you just let go of my hand. I," he looked around, as if seeking an excuse for why she should let go of him. "I can't eat with you holding my hand like that. Neither can you."

Selene grinned a fang filled grin at him. For a second, he thought she wasn't going to do as asked. Which was why he was glad she did, allowing him to breathe easier.

"You are just too cute."

Then he went right back to being an uneasy wreck. Really, he didn't know whether to scowl at someone calling him cute, or blush at her words as well as the look she was giving him.

XoX

Harry Potter just barely managed to stifle a yawn as he sat on a seat next to Misses Crawft while both he and her watched Lisa's dance lessons. The effects of the potion had worn off, and while he did not suffer from any kind of crash, without the energy from the pepper up potion keeping him going, he was close to running on empty.

It was just a little over eight hours since he'd had breakfast with Selene. Nicolas and Perennelle had found them a few minutes after they had finished eating and whisked them away, him to the alchemy lab where he began working on his next transmutation circle, and Selene to Paris after Perennelle had mentioned something about the girl needing more clothes.

Which was understandable, seeing as the only pair she had were the

ones Harry found her in. Even though he had fixed them and washed the blood off (magic was dead useful for that), one pair of clothes were not enough for someone to wear while staying on an undetermined extended visit.

Still, did they really have to buy so much? The last Harry saw of them before using the time turner was both women carrying what looked like an entire department stores worth of clothes.

Well, he guessed with the Philosopher's Stone they could afford it. It wasn't like money was an issue with them.

"Are you alright?"

Startled, Harry blinked several times as he realized he had been nodding off again. He turned his head to look over at Misses Crawft, who was staring at him with worry.

"I'm fine," Harry replied almost reflexively.

"You look tired," she countered. Harry grimaced.

"I didn't sleep that well last night."

He hated lying, especially to her. If there was one person Harry disliked lying to almost as much as Lisa, it was her mother. She had always been so kind to him that keeping things from her felt like he was doing her a great injustice.

But what else could he do? It wasn't like he could just tell her that the reason he was tired was because he was using a time turner to go back in time eight hours each day thereby ensuring that the normal five hours of sleep he usually got was no longer enough. He just could not see that going over well.

"You didn't have to come if you were tired," Misses Crawft said gently, as only a mother could. "I'm sure Lisa would have understood if you stayed at home to get some sleep. It isn't like this is a dance recital or anything."

"I made her a promise," Harry told her stubbornly. "I told her I would

come to watch her practice."

Misses Crawft sighed, shook her head, then smiled.

"You are the most stubborn child I have ever met," she declared, partly in mirth and partly in worry. Harry just grunted, feeling more annoyed that she had called him a child than anything else. "Still, what's done is done, and Lisa's session is just about finished, so I guess there's no point arguing over it."

Indeed, the dance class was close to concluding. Harry could see Lisa and the other girls in her class finishing their class with some stretching.

The dance class was much like Master Wei's Dao, only without the sparring mat, weapons, and various scrolls. There was also the fact that all of the people in this class were girls, while most of the students his martial arts instructor had were boys with one or two girls like Katrina who preferred learning martial combat to dancing.

The age range for the girls in class were also a bit more varied. Harry could see ages ranging from girls around Lisa's age and younger, to full grown women. Master Wei's class was much more structured when it came to age. Most of the older students had a higher belt, unless they were new, so the older ones were in the classes that happened later in the day.

As the dance class finally came to an end, Lisa said goodbye to her friends, who giggled as they said something that made her blush a fierce red while both parties gave discreet looks at Harry. With a small huff of what sounded like frustrated, or maybe embarrassment, the young girl with brown hair walked over to the two people watching her.

"So what did you guys think?" she asked both of them, though her attention was really just focused on Harry. Her mother looked amused.

"You did well," Harry complimented, his posture straightening from the slouch it had been in since the start of her class before she could notice. "I can tell you've been practicing a lot, and you've gotten much better than when you started."

"Ah!" Lisa gave a small gasp, her face turning to hide the irrefutable redness of her cheeks. Not that it did much good. "T-Thank you," she mumbled, looking down at her dance shoes.

Had Harry not been so tired, he would have snickered a bit at how cute she was being. No matter how many times he committed it to memory, watching his best friend get all embarrassed over a simple compliment never ceased to amuse him.

"Come on you two," Misses Crawft stood up from her seat, prompting Harry to do the same. "Let's head back home."

Less than fifteen minutes later, the three of them were in the car as it drove down the street.

Harry found himself once more nodding off as he looked out through the window, watching buildings, people, and street lamps go by. His eyes were becoming increasingly heavy, and his mind felt strangely fuzzy, like it was being filled with static or some other form of electromagnetic interference that blocked or otherwise hampered his ability to process thoughts logically.

"Harry," Lisa's concerned voice caused him to jerk awake just as he had been about to fall asleep. Blinking, his tired eyes traveled over to Lisa, who looked very worried about him. "Are you ok?"

"Just not sleeping well is all," Harry offered the girl a tired smile. She just frowned at him.

"You should get some rest," she told him firmly. "It will take about half an hour to home. Why don't you get some sleep before then? I'll wake you up when we get home."

Harry opened his mouth to offer a protest, but all that came out was a very prominent yawn. As if a damn had suddenly burst inside of him, Harry began to feel increasingly drowsy as the seconds past. His body soon betrayed him, as did his mind. His eyes began shutting without his permission, his mind began to grow more and more dim as if a fog was covering it, and his muscles began relaxing to the point where he started to slump over.

A familiar scent soon hit him as his nose found itself buried in soft strands of what he absently recognized as hair. Vanilla. He would know that scent anywhere. Even before his jaguar enhanced sense of smell came to be, Harry had known the smell. He had come to associate it with comfort and friendship, maybe even family.

The last thing he felt before sleep took it him was the feeling of an arm sliding around his back and the familiar warmth of Lisa as she let him lay against her.

XoX

Irritation did not begin to fully cover how Harry felt at that moment. He was tired, the bags under his eyes could tell anyone that. The pepper up potion he had made came with a minor problem it seemed. While it did not give the invariable crash that came from the standard potion, when consumed in large quantities the body built up an immunity to it, making the potion all but useless after five or six doses.

He was irritable. Lack of sleep had caused him to become very snappish, especially when people suggested he get more rest. He could not rest, not now. There was far too much for him to do that getting more rest would be not only be counter productive to his goals, but also hinder him.

Harry was also not making much progress with his next transmutation circle. He was now learning how to combine multiple elements in a circle in order to create an object that was made from more than one elemental composition. It was his hope that he could combine Wind and Earth of the Four Classical Elements with Mercury of the Three Essential Principles to create an ornate chair similar to the ones in the Flamel Mansion. Now that he understood the basics of the Three Essential Principles, and Mercury in particular, he could use the knowledge to transmute more than just Mercury, which he now understood represented metal and not just the chemical composition of the element itself.

Unfortunately, he was not making any progress. It was incredibly frustrating to know so much yet not have a single idea on how he should go about making his transmutation circle.

Of course, all of these issues were but a facet of the many reasons he

was irritated. There was another reason he was in such a foul mood. That reason being...

"Dammit! Selene! Would you stop staring at me while I'm trying to work!"

He was doing his work in the lobby of the Flamel Estate, sitting at a table while he worked. On the couch behind him was none other than Selene, who he could feel gazing into his back.

Said girl was laying on her stomach, her feet idly kicking in the air as she bent her legs at the knees. Her elbows were resting on the couch to raise her forearms so she could rest her head in the palms of her hands. She looked completely and utterly relaxed, and amused, as she watched Harry work.

It was driving him absolutely insane.

"Such a foul temper you have today, amore," she did not seem at all bothered by his harsh words. Indeed, it seemed almost as if she had not even heard them. The only way one could tell she had heard him was the amused smirk on her pretty face. "You need to learn how to relax. You're not going to get any work done if you don't get some rest."

"I can't." Harry would have glared at her if he could be bothered to turn his head. He didn't want to look away from his work. "I've got too much work to do. I have to get this finished as soon as I can so I can begin learning the more advanced lessons from Master Flamel. The month of July is almost up and I'm only going to be learning from him for a few more weeks. I can't afford to get lackadaisical now."

It probably had something to do with the fact that he was not looking at her in conjunction with just how quiet Selene could be, but heard barely more than a whisper of cloth rustling against cloth as she stood up.

Her footsteps were near silent as she made her way to him, closing the distance quite quickly.

His body became stiffer than a board as a pair of arms wrapped around his neck. If it were possible, he would have gone even stiffer when a pair of developing breasts pressed themselves against his back. Since that

was not possible, his face turned a shade of red that had yet to exist in this world.

Had his mind been sound, he probably would have questioned how something as simple as physical contact could make him feel so odd. He had shared intimate moments with Lisa many times, and had received a number of hugs from Tracey and Hermione. Even Daphne had her moments, and though those times were very restrained, there was something incredibly intimate about them. Like they were sharing more than just physical contact.

Had he not been so tired, he would have at least questioned Selene on her actions. Why was she doing this? They had just met, and even though he had saved her they were not really friends? Why then, was she getting so close to him?

And finally, had he been more experienced when it came to women, or perhaps older, he probably would have realized what she was doing.

But he didn't. As much as Harry liked to think of himself as an adult, there were some things that he was just too young to understand. Not even those romance novels Lisa loved reading so much could prepare him for what the vampire behind him was doing.

Not that he would have used them as a reference for this kind of moment anyways. Those books were fiction, untrue, false. They didn't give a realistic and in depth look inside of the female mind at all. Those books were just some fools attempt at creating a story where two people got together and began procreating for no discernible reason as they were obviously not doing it to have children.

"I know you want to keep working," Selene's hot breath tickled his ear as she whispered into it. Harry tried not to shudder. Tried, and failed miserably. "I do understand. You are a very hard working young man."

Harry's stomach began doing flip flops, so many it felt like it was trying to bounce it's way out of his throat. He felt almost like he was going to regurgitate his breakfast, only, not at the same time. It was, like most of the sensations he had experienced when in the presence of this girl, something he had no clue how to clarify or handle.

"But you must learn that you can't keep doing this. Your body is tired, your mind is tired. If you keep this up, it won't matter how long or hard you work, you won't be able to get any better. You won't learn, you won't grow, and you may end up making mistakes that could hurt you."

Words tried to come out of Harry's mouth, but like the rest of his body, he could not seem to make them work. This girl's scent, her body pressed against his, her arms as they wound their way around his neck, everything about her was causing him to feel delirious.

And was she rubbing her cheek against his?

"I am worried about you," she continued, and Harry realized with a shudder that, yes, she was rubbing her cheek against his. A tender caress of skin on skin that sent jolts of lightning through him starting from where her body was touching his all the way to his feet. "You are burning yourself out, and if you keep this up, I am worried that you will get hurt."

"So please..."

Oh god. That voice. That pleading voice that awakened something undeniably primal in him was almost too much to bear.

"Let me take you out to lunch so you can relax and then get some rest."

Harry, bless his soul, managed to get his brain working enough that he could actually respond with words. Showing just how stubborn he was, he clung to that last little bit of desperation to finish his work.

"I... can't. I-I need to.. to finish this before..."

"If it is really that much of an issue, you could just use the time turner twice, once to return to this point in time, and another to go back thirteen hours."

"Thirteen?" For some reason, that number caused his mind to restart slightly. Just slightly. "Why thirteen?"

"So you can get some extra sleep of course. You've been going back eight hours only each day, meaning you only get five hours of sleep for

every sixteen hours awake."

"Actually I usually only get five hours of sleep for every nineteen hours," Harry muttered almost absently as he corrected her. Selene blinked, but went with it."

"Then that's even worse. You're only getting five hours of sleep for every twenty seven hours. You could easily just go back thirteen hours and use one of the guest rooms to get some extra rest before portkeying home after your past self leaves. It's not like using the time turner actually ages you or anything. You can afford to use it a little more."

Time turners were very interesting devices. What they did was create a sphere, or a bubble, in which the person using the time turner remained stationary while the rest of the world moved backwards. It was an interesting bit of magic, one made even more interesting by the fact that the person using the time turner actually moved backwards in time relative to everyone else, but was not effected beyond that due to being within the time turners sphere of influence.

Harry, had his mind been working, would have cursed himself for not having come up with such a simple method of getting more rest. Why hadn't he thought of that before? It was such a simple solution that his mind seemed to have not even bothered thinking of it as a viable option.

"Will you agree to relax now, amore?" asked Selene. Harry, unable to even think of conjuring up another counter argument for why he should not do as she suggested, could do little more than nod.

His brain was still mostly stuck in limbo.

The kiss on the cheek he received for his silent answer was almost enough to jolt him back into conscious thought. Almost.

"Good," Selene unwrapped herself from around Harry and stood up, dispersing the strange tension that had been in the air like someone popping a balloon with a needle. Harry blinked as she took one of his hands in her own, pulled him to his feet, then began leading him to the entryway so they could portkey out of the Flamel Estate. "There's this lovely restaurant I wanted to go to when I was shopping with Perennelle,

but did not get the chance."

XoX

Rue de la Magie, or Magic Street, was the French equivalent of Diagon Alley. It was the largest shopping center for magical beings within France, with hundreds of stores that sold all kinds of magical paraphernalia. Harry could see everything from potion stores to stores that sold cauldrons to broom shops, wands and more. It looked like everything Diagon Alley had, *Rue de la Magie* had as well.

Of course, even if the two places were of the same mold, they were not of the same make. Where Diagon Alley possessed the feel of a bazaar taken straight from medieval times, *Rue de la Magie* was a fascinating combination of Renaissance styled buildings and modern architecture that seemed to create a seamless flow between the two styles. Both were beautiful in their own way, but also vastly different from each other.

As the name implied, *Rue de la Magie* was a street, a thoroughfare that connected several different streets within the magical community together. Unlike Diagon Alley, which wavered and turned and twisted with small paths that felt like they had been placed completely at random, France's magical community had order to it. Streets were straight and pristine, the roads were standard muggle roads that did not deviate from their narrow lines. Branching off from the main thoroughfare were several smaller streets and back alleys that led to more shops and stores.

There was also much more life within *Rue de la Magie*. Human life, yes. Being in the mainland meant there were more people here than at Magical Britain. But there was also a lot of plant life.

Lining the street on either side were several trees, ubiquitous London Plane from the looks of them, that were planted in a square patch of dirt roughly half a meter wide spaced over two meter intervals. They created a just as stark contrast to Diagon Alley as the architecture was, which had no flora or fauna to speak of.

And the trees were not the only existing plant life in the magical district. Several parks had been strategically placed to offer children an area to relax and play while the adults sat down and conversed outside of shops

and open air cafes while they rested from their shopping excursions.

That was another thing that just showed how different the culture in France was from Britain. While the English were nowhere near as bad as Americans, who were almost as bad as goblins with their need to rush everywhere as if wasting even one second was anathema to them, they still maintained a more 'time is money' approach to most things. This difference in culture was never shown more clearly to Harry than now.

At Diagon Alley, there was always a rush. Always. People were constantly hustling from one area to the next, rarely taking time to just stop and relax. The crowds would push and shove as they tried to bustle off to their next stop so they can get their shopping done as soon as possible.

Here, such was not the case. While even busier and more crowded than Diagon Alley, *Rue de la Magie* possessed none of the urgency Harry often sensed lurking within the other magical community. The pace of people as they walked was slower, some people were even just standing around as they conversed. He could see a number of people sitting down at open air cafes, sipping a cappuccino or laté either alone or with friends. It was so different from the more aged looking Diagon Alley.

Even the magic here felt different. While it still hummed vibrantly within the back of his mind, it felt more relaxed in a way. If he had to describe the feeling of the magic here with a word, he would say it felt lucid.

Sitting at a table inside of the salon of the restaurant he was eating at, Harry could admit, if only to himself, that he was actually grateful Selene had made him come out here.

The restaurant was called Maxim's, and it was a literal temple of Art Nouvea. As was the case with Art Nouvea, the decorations within the restaurant held a complete disdain for straight lines and sharp edges, preferring a more natural theme with graceful waves and billows. The main theme behind the art was flora, plant life. Painted along the walls, the ceiling, and even stitched into the carpet were intricate illustrations of various flowers that were interwoven together in a beautiful blend that seemed to capture the essence of nature.

The restaurant was one of the few located within the magical district of *Rue de la Magie*. It was also one of the more expensive places to eat, which would explain why there were so many nobles sitting around in expensive wizarding robes as they ate their meals and made light conversation.

Harry had no idea how Selene had managed to get them entrance. All signs pointed towards Perennelle's aid.

"You know, I'm very surprised you can actually eat human food."

Harry's comment had Selene look up from her glass of wine, a Cabernet Sauvignon, with a slight smile. She was wearing an expensive black gown with a plunging V-neck that went all the way down to her solar plexus just below the bust and allowed for an enticing view of her creamy, milk colored cleavage. Harry tried not to pay attention to the sway of her bosom caused by the slight movements she made. He was too young to be interested in such things.

"You are?" she sounded amused.

"Yes," Harry nodded his head as he gestured towards the food Selene was eating; Filet de Boeuf au Poivre, a grilled filet mignon in a rich peppercorn red brandy cream sauce. "I hadn't realized vampires could eat regular food. I thought you only drank blood."

"We don't need to eat regular human food," Selene admitted with an elegant shrug. "And most of us don't. However, there are a rare few who enjoy eating food like this." She absently swirled her wine just a bit before taking a small sip. "My father, for one. He may be a hard liner when it comes to vampire traditionalism, but he will never turn down a rare steak and red wine."

"I see," Harry took her words in stride. "Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"You just did," Selene said with a smile. Harry rolled his eyes.

"Very well, do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

Selene hummed for a moment, as if taking his question under serious advisement. After several seconds of watching Harry's face become more and more uncomfortable, she smirked.

"Go ahead."

"You said your last name was Dracul," Harry began. "I was just wondering if you were related to Vlad III, the member of the House of Drăculești who later on went to become known as Vlad the Impaler."

Selene was silent for a moment.

"And if I was?" she asked finally. "What would you do?"

"What would I... do?" Harry blinked, confused. "What do you mean? I wouldn't do anything. It's not like I care who you're related to. I was just curious."

For just a second, Selene looked well and truly shocked. It was almost worth all those strange feelings and desires this girl brought to the fore in him to see her look like she had just taken a metaphorical curve ball to the face. Almost.

"You are proving yourself to be a more and more interesting individual, amore," she sounded pleased for some reason. "Yes, I am related to Vlad III Drăculea."

"So Vlad really was a vampire..." Harry mused. The tales of Count Dracula made by Bram Stoker had been based off of Vlad the Impaler. Ever since he had learned that Vampires did indeed exist, he had wondered if stories such as that held any truth to them.

Selene shook her head.

"No," she corrected. "Vlad was not a vampire, just a human with an insatiable blood lust. Our family did not become vampires until after Vlad's death, sometime in the early fifteen hundreds, when a man bearing a grudge against Vlad cursed his family line to forever crave the taste of human blood. Or so the story goes. I myself don't know how true it is, but it is a story that's been passed down through my family for

generations."

"Ah..."

Harry said nothing more, turning the majority of attention to his own food; Carre d'Agneau, roasted rack of lamb served over a roasted garlic rosemary demi-glace and garnished with flageolet beans. It was an exquisite meal. Truly, the French knew how to make good food.

The meal was finished eventually. As the waiter would likely not be there for a while (dinner in France was meant to be enjoyed with conversation, not rushed like you were eating at McDonalds), Selene used this time to open up dialogue again.

"Tell me, amore, have you ever tried wine tasting?"

Harry made a face, both at her petname and her question.

He was actually getting used to her name for him, but it still bothered him to be called love by someone he just met.

It probably would have bothered him if *anyone* called him that.

"I'm not even twelve years old yet. What makes you think I would have ever consumed any kind of alcohol?"

"A simple yes or no would do," Selene said.

"Then no, I have not."

"I thought not."

Harry almost rolled his eyes again as Selene hailed down a waiter.

"*Excuse me,*" she said, switching from English to French seamlessly. It was impressive. Harry could do it, of course, but he had eidetic memory so everything he could do felt less impressive than it really was. "*Could I bother you for a bottle of Chateau Margaux and another glass?*"

The waiter blinked, his eyes looking at the glass of red wine in Selene's

hand, then cast a dubious glance at Harry. He was obviously connecting the dots and realized Harry was far too young to drink.

Just how Selene had managed to get a glass of wine for herself was a mystery he had yet to solve.

Selene must have seen this too, because she immediately sprung into action.

"*Please?*" she asked, leaning over ever so slightly towards the waiter, a young man of about twenty or so. It was just enough that the waiter could see down the V-neck of her dress very easily.

Harry grit his teeth to keep from grinding them when he saw the man begin to blatantly stare at Selene's chest. When the man licked his lips with his lust and desire obvious in his eyes, Harry nearly snapped.

Hadn't this cretin ever heard of restraint? She was fourteen years old for Christ's sakes!

Several feet away from where Harry and Selene were seated, several of the lights within the ceiling exploded in a shower of glass fragments that rained down upon the hapless guests. A number of screams of shock, surprise, and fear rose into the air. A threnody of voices all called out in unison as people began jabbering away at the frightful occurrence.

Selene looked at Harry as he clenched his hands so hard they looked like they might bleed at any second. She smirked, before turning to look back at the waiter, grabbing his attention with a gentle tug on his sleeve.

When the shocked young man looked back at her, she gave him one of those heart-fluttering smiles.

Harry grit his teeth some more.

"*About that wine?*"

"*Oh... of course,*" the waiter stuttered, not even seeming to question her now. His eyes moved back down to her cleavage, and this time, Harry did begin grinding his teeth. "*I will be right back.*"

"Jealous?" asked a smirking Selene as she looked at Harry. Said heir just frowned.

"Why would I be jealous?" he asked with a slightly irritable expression. "I simply didn't like how he was looking at you like that. He's well over the acceptable age limit to be even eying someone as young as you. The ignorant, pompous cochon! He should have some restraint!"

"You can't blame him for looking at me," Selene chided, the strangely pleased smile not leaving her face. "He is a male. It is the prerogative of all males to stare at beautiful women such as myself no matter the age. It's human instinct."

Harry felt like huffing, but didn't, as he felt it would make him seem childish.

"There is such a thing as human decency," he told her, still feeling irrationally angry. "He should have known better not to stare at someone who's probably ten years younger than him."

Harry did not like the smile that appeared on Selene's face as she hummed in thought.

A few seconds later, the waiter came back up and set a glass down in front of Selene. He was about to pour it for her, but she quickly placed her hand on the bottle and pulled it away from him.

"*Thank you,*" she said before dismissing the waiter entirely. The young man blinked, then narrowed his eyes. Harry could not help but feel a tad vindicated as he watched the swine leave with an expression of anger on his face.

"Wine tasting is the sensory examination and evaluation of wine," Selene started, her tone taking on a far different quality than Harry was used to hearing from her. It sounded almost like she was reciting something someone else had once told her. "There are five basic steps of wine tasting: color, swirl, smell, taste, savor. Or if you'd prefer: see, swirl, sniff, sip, savor."

"I'm surprised you know anything about wine tasting," Harry commented

as he watched her uncork the bottle with a slight pop.

"My father enjoys a good wine," Selene said with a smile. "It is one of his many foibles." She grimaced. "I have often had to listen to him lecture about how a good red wine is almost as good as blood."

Now Harry understood. She must have learned about wine tasting from hearing her father talk about it so many times. Interesting.

He decided to remain silent for the rest of the 'lesson'. While he didn't really care for wine, there may come a time where he had to entertain guests. Knowing how to properly taste wine would probably be a boon in helping him with that endeavor. At the very least his knowledge may impress the rich nobles who enjoy a good wine.

After pouring the wine into the glass, Selene stood up and walked over to Harry's side of the table, glass in hand.

She gently set the glass down and moved behind Harry. Said boy felt a jolt of shock, embarrassment and... something else he could not determine but was pleasurable nonetheless as the daughter of Dracul pressed herself against his back.

Grabbing his right hand in her own, Selene guided Harry to take the glass of wine.

"The first step," Selene's hot breath whispered in his ear, causing him to shudder. "Is judging the color. We do this on a white background because white is a combination of all colors and won't cause us to see colors within the wine that may not actually be there..."

That day, Harry Potter was taught the art of wine tasting from Selene.

It was a very, very good thing he had eidetic memory or he would have not remembered a single word she said.

XoX

It was later that night that Harry appeared within his room at the Dursley's residence with a silent pop.

After eating out with Selene, Harry had felt much better, though also incredibly flustered for some reason. His good mood had improved even more when he took a long, six hour nap before using the time turner to go back fourteen hours so he could do all of the activities he normally did in England.

Lisa had commented on his very much improved attitude from his recent grouchiness.

Walking over to his desk, Harry set down the stack of letters in his hands. He had gone over to Andromeda's that night for dinner after spending an entire day, minus the two hour sparring session he had with Katrina, with Lisa Crawft and retrieved the mail that had been sent to her residence for him.

Harry was very pleased to see that his idea to insure his mail was not intercepted worked. He also had to thank both Lisa Turpin and Tracey Davis for sending word along to his other friends.

Hedwig had not been as pleased as he was. His partner had made her displeasure known with a rather nasty pecking to the forehead when he got home the first time after getting his mail from Andromeda. He had only managed to make her stop by suggesting she stay with his adviser-slash-barrister for the duration of his summer, or until he managed to catch the fool trying to steal his mail.

Andromeda had not been very pleased, especially when Hedwig attacked an owl bringing mail to her.

Looking over the letters, Harry took note of who they belonged to. He had one from each of his friends minus Blaise, who was still in Italy and would not be back until the end of July, and Hannah and Susan, both of whom were in the States.

Reading over the letters, Harry took care to reply to each one. Nothing had changed since he had seen Lisa and Tracey two days ago, so his response was very short. Terry had gotten a new muggle telescope, which he was going on about in his letter. Harry decided it would be a good idea to direct him to some of the more advanced muggle telescopes the Ravenclaw could observe at one of the science centers he had been

to.

Daphne's letter was the same as always, asking how he was doing while unloading a few of her frustrations about her father. He wished he could do more for her, but until he found out what it would take to convince Nathaniel Greengrass not to sell his daughter off like chattel, there was little else he could do but listen.

The letter that interested him the most was the one from Neville:

To the Heir Apparent of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter,

Hey Harry. I'm glad to hear you're doing well. That muggle sport you mentioned, martial arts, sounds really interesting. I really want to learn it. I even tried to convince my gran to let me sign up for classes, but she turned it down saying I needed to get stronger before she would do something like that. I'm hoping I can do that this year when we get back to Hogwarts and begin doing those work outs.

Did you know that our birthdays are in the same month? I always knew, but I wasn't sure if you did because you live with your muggle relatives and I never told you my birthday. The reason I'm telling you this is because my gran suggested the two of us having a small party at our house. I've already sent invitations to our friends, and I am hoping you'll be able to come as well.

The envelope is actually a portkey that will take you to Longbottom Manor. The password to activate it is Birthday.

The party will start at noon.

Hope to see you there,

The Heir Apparent of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Longbottom.

Neville Longbottom.

Harry read with a thoughtful look. How interesting. He had not actually known when Neville's birthday was, seeing as the other boy had never told him. Of course, everybody knew when his birthday was because he

was a wizarding celebrities for the most ridiculous of reasons.

Which would explain why Neville knew their birthdays were in the same month.

Harry absently set down the letter and picked up the envelope. It was made from a heavy, thick parchment, the kind Harry had come to expect from old magical families.

The wax seal was of the family crest, a squarish shield with rounded tips at the bottom and a sharp point in the center. The shield was divided into three segments by a thick line that gave the three segments multiple rounded bumps. Within each segment was curved Nordic style horn tied to a string.

Above the shield was a knights helm, highly detailed with a flat top and sharp visor. Flaring out behind it were large, leaf patterns that wove around the helm and shield. At the bottom of the family coat of arms was the family motto: *Labor Omnia Vincit*, Work Conquers All. It was a surprisingly Hufflepuff motto for a family that has been traditionally Gryffindor for the last five Centuries.

The choice of whether or not he should go to the party was not hard. It just meant he would be using the time turner twice on July thirty first. He would need to get permission from Nicolas Flamel, as this was outside of the jurisdiction of what his teacher had allowed him to use it for, but if there were no problems on that front, then he would be good to go.

It looked like he would be celebrating his birthday twice this year. How fun.

This chapter is now finished. I apologize for the wait. I meant to get this out yesterday, but, well, if you read my blog you'll know what happened.

Anyways, I wanted to thank you all for the 167 reviews I got last chapter. It's you guys who keep reviewing this story that make it one of my favorite to write. Please be sure to keep it up and let me know how I did on this chapter.

And do not forget to check out my blog: Thoughts and Wonderings of a Fanfiction Writer. The link is on my profile.

Birthday Bash Times Three

Chapter 7: A Birthday Bash Times Three

"So the Dracul family isn't the only Vampire coven out there?" Harry asked as he and Selene once again found themselves sitting out on the Veranda eating breakfast. As usual, Harry was eating six eggs, sunnyside up this time, with his Greek yogurt fruit bowl. Instead of orange juice, this time he had a cup of steaming Earl Grey tea. Meanwhile, Selene was having her usual fair right down to the foam covered cappuccino.

It had become something of a tradition between them to always have breakfast together before Nicolas pulled Harry away to begin teaching him. Harry in particular enjoyed these moments because it was a chance to pick Selene's brain about Vampires and Vampire Traditions. He often found himself captivated by the depth of knowledge this girl told him about her race.

"That's right," Selene nodded her head as she picked up her cappuccino and took a sip. When she pulled away there was a mild amount of foam on her upper lip, making it look like she had a light brown mustache. "The Dracul family is actually a newer coven. We've only been around for a little less than five hundred years. Some of the older covens have existed for well over two thousand years. I know of at least thirteen covens who are far older and more powerful than the House of Dracul."

"That means they were around before the time of the founders," Harry murmured to himself. Now *that* was interesting. The Four Founders who had built Hogwarts had been around since before the start of the new calender. If he recalled his information correctly, Hogwarts had originally be built during the late first century, and both Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin had been almost a century into their life before than.

It was interesting to note that witches and wizards back then lived much longer than they did now. By the time he had died, Godric Gryffindor was three hundred and twenty two years old. Dumbledore would be lucky if he

lived to be two hundred.

Despite his mind registering and cataloging the information in the space of his brain where he stored all the knowledge he had acquired on vampires, his attention was elsewhere.

Namely, it was one the foam that was *still* on Selene's upper lip.

"Selene," Harry coughed into his hand to get her attention.

"Hmm?" Selene looked up at him, a small smile playing on her face.

"You have a little something on your..." Harry pointed to his upper lip, trying to indicate that she had foam on her lip without sounding rude. He was actually surprised she had not wiped it off yet. It was pretty thick foam. Had she truly not noticed it?

"Something on my what?" asked Selene, tilting her head to the side in what passed as general inquisitiveness. Harry grimaced. He was now sure she was doing it on purpose, not wiping it off because she knew it would bother him. She was trapping him because she knew he would not be able to talk with her while foam was covering her mouth like that.

And dammit if it didn't work. It was beginning to drive him to distraction!

"Here, let me get that for you."

Grabbing his napkin, Harry leaned over and gently wiped off the foam from Selene's upper lip. Judging from the smile on her face, he knew this was what she had wanted. Just why she had wanted it was something he still had yet to discover.

"Thank you," Selene grabbed his hand before he could take it away, her vampire speed and strength far exceeding his natural human strength. It bothered him tremendously that she was so much stronger than him physically simply because she was a pureblood Vampire while he was just human. He wouldn't take it out on her, because it wasn't her fault, but that did not stop it from annoying him.

She took the napkin from his hand, setting it on the table before allowing

it to join her other hand in holding his. Slowly, she pressed her lush, red lips against his palm, kissing it. "You're always such a gentlemen."

Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes. For whatever reason, Selene always acted like this when he was around. He assumed it was just her personality, how she always acted regardless of most circumstances. By this point in time he had pretty much grown used to her antics. Desensitization, he believed it was called.

"You're welcome," Harry played along. It was easier to let her have her fun. Less embarrassing that way as well.

He had expected Selene to do what she usually did when he got caught in her trap; smile, say something to try and make him blush, then allow him to regroup. It was what she usually did.

When, after several seconds, Selene did not let go of his hand, Harry looked back at the young Vampire currently in his company.

His first, immediate observation of Selene was to note that her eyes were partially glazed over and half lidded. They were different from the usual half-lidded look she often gave him, the one that still managed to set his heart racing for some reason beyond his comprehension. That gaze looked like it was piercing him, stripping him, devouring him.

This gaze just looked hungry.

Another thing he took careful notice of was that his hand was still near her face and she was... sniffing it? Yes, she was sniffing his hand. He could feel the small amount of wind caressing his skin as she proceeded to inhale and exhale through her nose. The action tickled his skin.

"Selene?" Breaking out of whatever thoughts were going through her head, Selene looked over at Harry who had a mildly concerned look on his face. "Are you alright?"

Selene blinked once, her eyes cleared, then she took in her surroundings. Noticing that she still had Harry's hand in her own, she closed her eyes and took a slow breath before carefully letting it go.

Harry flexed his hand for a moment. It was a bit numb because she had been holding it tighter than normal, but feeling was already beginning to return to it, so he wasn't worried.

Rather, he was more worried about the girl sitting with him. He didn't know what had just happened, but it was not something that had happened before. Was something wrong with her? Or was this a one time thing?

"I'm fine," she told him, her eyes opening again as she gave him a smile. "Just a little hungrier than I expected to be, I guess."

While most people would probably think the comment innocuous, Harry had been around Selene long enough to know her words usually had an underlying meaning to them. Considering her actions and just who, or to be more precise *what* she was, he had a good guess as to what she was talking about.

"Selene," Harry said carefully, eying the older girl. "How long has it been since you've had a proper feeding?"

Another blink. Selene actually looked mildly startled by the question, but much like the professional at keeping her emotions hidden that she was, she managed to mask the look quickly.

"A while," she answered neutrally. There was a slight shifting of her body in her seat that told Harry she was not exactly comfortable discussing this with him. Because he was human? Maybe. Possibly. "I haven't actually ingested blood for a while, and the last transfusion of it I had according to Perenelle was when she was healing me."

Meaning she had likely not actually fed on blood for somewhere around a week and the last time she had fed was using the blood he had given Perennelle to help her heal. Did that mean she would need to feed soon? Just how long could a vampire last before they needed blood anyways?

"Don't worry though," Selene gave Harry a quick wink, her racy smile back in place. "I won't bite you or anything. At least..."

"Not unless I want you to," Harry finished for her, his voice dry. Selene's

smile just grew, but he was not paying as much attention to it as he normally did. "How often do pureblood Vampires need to feed on blood?"

Selene's smile grew slightly pensive at his question. He was apparently stepping into uncomfortable territory again. Still, she answered him to the best of her abilities.

"A pureblood doesn't need blood very often. A glass once every week at most." Almost as an after thought, she added, "but we can also prolong that period by eating anything with a lot of blood in it."

"Which would explain why you've been eating so much rare steak," Harry nodded.

"That's right," Selene gave him a nod. "With all the extra rare steak I've been eating, I should be able to last another week or so before I'm forced to feed."

Harry just managed to contain his grimace. Forced to feed was a very mild euphemism that did nothing to describe the true horror of what would happen if she didn't feed.

Vampires were a rather odd race of supernatural magical creatures. They lived off blood, needed it to survive. If they went without blood, their bodies would begin rejecting their souls and their minds would induce them into a bloodlust state where the only thing that mattered to them was feeding on something, *anything*, to get that needed nutrition.

At the same time, if a vampire drank too much blood, they would lose themselves to bloodlust as well. It was a highly unusual affliction; a vampire had to drink blood within a certain amount of time in order to retain their sanity, but if they drank too much they would lose their sanity just as surely as they would if they did not drink enough. Anymore or less than the exact amount needed would result in the same problem, the vampire in question losing their mind to their bloodlust and becoming a mindless beast.

This would usually end up with them being put down. They would feed and feed and feed and never stop until someone killed them. Vampires who lost themselves to bloodlust were a risk to the entire race and so

those who lost themselves were killed before they could go on a killing spree and prove their existence to the entire world.

"Harry?" Selene's voice was an echo of her confusion as she watched Harry pull out his mother's wand and use his minor skills in conjuration to create a small glass cup. Raising his left arm and holding it over the cup he pressed the tip of the wand against it and slowly started to draw it across his wrist.

Blood quickly began pouring out of the wound as Harry sliced through both the radial vein and artery in one go. The crimson colored life giving liquid gushed out of his arm and trickled into the cup like a small waterfall from a stream, filling the cup quickly.

"What are you doing!?" A look over at Selene showed Harry that the girl was shocked. Not surprised, but well and truly shocked. Her glowing, silvery blue eyes had grown quite wide, wider than he had ever seen, and her mouth was hanging open like a bad impression of a fish out of water.

He had to admit, it was nice to be able to actually get one over on the girl who had caused him so many troubles within the few days she had been here. It also gave him a possible understanding of the young vampire. If this was why Selene was so set on making him lose his composure, he could see why she did it. It was terribly amusing to see someone lose their normally collected head when something unexpected happened.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Harry asked gruffly. He was beginning to feel light headed from blood loss, but thankfully wouldn't need much more. The cup was almost full. "I'm not going to have you suffering from lack of blood when I could do something to help. I didn't rescue you from those Vatican hired mercenaries just so you could go crazy with bloodlust."

Technically, he had not meant to rescue her, it had just turned out this way. It still did not change the fact that he *had* rescued her.

"But – but that's – I mean, you don't have to –"

Harry had to admit that it was very, *very* amusing to see the girl who had always seemed so calm and collected even when she was being overly

affectionate and sensual to him seem so flustered. While Harry would not call himself a vindictive person, he would admit to enjoying the way she could not form a coherent sentence and how her cheeks became suffused with a lovely shade of pink as her eyes locked onto his before straying to the side when she found herself incapable of maintaining eye contact.

Sometimes payback was a dish best served cold. Or with blood.

When the cup was finally full, Harry withdrew his arm and quickly began pumping as much magic into it as possible. He had never healed cut arteries or veins before, not knowingly at any rate, so he did not know how much magic he needed. Healing broken bones required a lot, however, and since this was just as if not more important than a bone it was better to be save than sorry.

It was fascinating to watch the wounds on his arm sealing up. It was almost like something was crawling over his veins, arteries, muscle tissue and skin. First the artery and vein healed up, followed by his muscles knitting together. Last, but not least, the small slit in his skin where he had cut himself sealed up with a slight hiss.

After several seconds, the wound was healed. Harry wiped off the blood that stained his arm, revealing clear, perfectly healthy skin. It was as if Harry had not just sliced open his arm.

"Here," Harry set the glass of blood in front of the still shocked to silence Selene. The girl was looking at him as if she had never seen him before. It was slightly unnerving, the way her eyes never blinked or moved from his face as she gaped at him.

Eventually, however, she did respond. Her pale cheeks became several shades lighter as a pinkish red hue suffused them. Her left hand came up and gently grabbed hold of the glass and lifted it up. She looked over at Harry as she brought the glass near her mouth, before quickly looking away, her cheeks turning an even darker shade of red.

Harry watched Selene slowly drink his blood. Her eyes had closed the moment the red liquid had touched her lips. Every few seconds her body would give little shudders, and Harry thought he heard strange noises

coming from her mouth. He didn't know what those sounds were as they did not sound like a gulp and they were too soft and too muffled by the glass for him to properly categorize.

A few seconds later, Selene brought the now empty cup back down, setting it on the table. She looked over at Harry and, once again, he got to lay witness to the girl who had often spent most of her time trying to see how red she could make his face blush.

It was so nice to see the shoe on the other foot for a change.

"Thank you," she mumbled so softly that were it not for his enhanced hearing, Harry would have missed it.

"You're welcome," Harry said.

"I really mean it, Harry," Selene continued, calling him by his name for the first time ever. Her hand came out and she laid it against one of his, the one currently resting closest to her on the table. "I –" she swallowed, then flushed a bit more as she turned her head. "You don't know how much this means to me. This was the first time... the first time anyone has ever let me drink their blood. Actually, this is the first time I drank blood that wasn't from a transfusion pack."

"Is me giving you my blood really that big of a deal?" asked Harry, honestly confused. He couldn't quite see what the big deal was. He bled so much during sparring sessions when he got punched in the face that the idea of giving someone some blood hardly mattered to him at all.

Maybe there was some kind of sentimental value involved that he just wasn't understanding. A Vampire thing, perhaps?

Selene looked at him in honest shock.

"Harry," she said, her voice trembling in a way it never had before. "Do you really not get it?"

"No," Harry shrugged.

"Harry," she repeated. "You are a wizard whose magic is very potent.

Magic is in the blood. For you to just give me blood to drink it's..." she paused, searching for the right words before shaking her head as she realized there were no right words to describe what had just happened. "It's unheard of. No wizard would ever willingly let a vampire drink their blood. That's like, one of the ultimate signs of trust you could possibly give a Vampire."

"Really?" Harry blinked, then shrugged. "I didn't know that." Then again, he did not know much about blood beyond its effects in alchemy. And while he had heard of blood magic and had most definitely heard the dogma spewed by people like Draco Malfoy about 'purebloods' and how superior they were to normal witches and wizards, he did not know much about that branch of magic and had never put much stock into blood superiority.

"Would you..."

Selene squirmed a bit in her seat, her fangs worrying her lower lip. For some reason, this shy Selene made Harry's heart race just as much as the one who gave him those predatory smiles with half-lidded eyes did.

What a troublesome young lady.

"Would I what?" asked Harry.

"If..." Selene took a deep breath, seemingly to gather her courage. "Now that you know this, would you have still given me your blood if I needed it?"

"I don't see why not." At Selene's shocked face, Harry decided to elaborate. "I'm not like most wizards, especially most pureblood wizards, who is biased and prejudice against everything that is not considered pure by their standards. Nor am I like muggles, who are superstitious and have grown to fear things like Vampires and Werewolves out of a lack of understanding. I base my judgments on others by *who* they are, not *what* they are."

The Dursleys had hated him simply for being a wizard. They hated him for what he was, not who he was. That, perhaps more than anything else, bothered Harry about his vile blood relatives. That unjust prejudice

against someone who is different. It was the reason Harry had taken these beliefs on treating others based on who they are as people and not what race they belong to in the first place.

"I do not care that you are a Vampire. You could be an alien for all I cared. What matters to me is not what race you belong to, but who you are as a person," Harry continued, now only slightly aware of the way Selene was staring at him like he was the sole center of her universe. He was once again in one of his elements. That of someone who was giving a passionate speech. The politician, as Daphne once called it when they were speaking privately. "And you, Selene, are a good person from what I have seen."

For a long moment not a word was spoken between the two. Harry had already said his piece, and Selene looked like she was having trouble digesting his words. She had probably grown up being taught that witches and wizards would always hate Vampires because of they were, Harry mused, so to find one who didn't give two squats, for lack of a better term, was no doubt mind blowing.

"I... I see..."

Eventually, Selene did regain the ability to speak, as well as her previous composure. She gave Harry that same smile she normally did, however, this time there was something different about it. It looked like... gratitude? Yes, that was there, but there were other emotions as well. A good number of them that Harry could not quite identify because they were so jumbled together on her face. In her expression. Still, Harry felt he understood the gist of them, and they were generally revolving around gratitude towards him.

"You truly are a most interesting individual, amore."

"So I've been told."

XoX

"Ah! There you are, apprentice!"

Harry almost rolled his eyes at the overly exaggerated tone in his

teacher's voice. As if the man did not know where he had been the moment he had arrived at the Flamel Estate. He had been eating out on the Veranda with Selene for the past two days, and each time his teacher had found him here. Logic dictated this was where he would be then.

Conclusion? Flamel was probably just trying to get on his nerves, like he always did.

Turning around, Harry and Selene both saw Nicolas and Perennelle Flamel walk out onto the Veranda.

"Come, come," Nicolas said, clapping his hands together once. All the dishes disappeared as if they had never existed. "It's time for our next lesson. Today we'll be learning how combining more than three of the Three Essential Principles and Four Classical Elements can interact with each other. Definitely not something you'll want to miss."

"Alright," Harry, looking visibly excited by his next lesson, ignored his teacher's eccentric behavior and stood up. This was one of the lessons he had been waiting for.

"And you, young one, will be coming with me," Perennelle told Selene after her husband's joyful chattering was finished. "I'm going into Paris again today to do some shopping and felt I could use some company while walking amongst the masses."

"Of course," Selene stood up, grinning. "I always enjoy seeing more of Paris. I don't get out of the coven compound very often."

"I would imagine so." Perennelle turned to look at Nicolas and Harry. "We will see you two after your lesson." She gave them both a look of warning, causing the two to gulp. "I expect you will not stay in that lab for more than a few hours, yes?"

"Of course, dear. Of course," Nicolas reassured his wife, earning him a quick peck on the lips. Harry tried not to gag. He never understood why people had to show such public displays of affection. He completely ignored the fact that they were at their house and not in a public setting. "Come along, Harry. Come along. Time to begin our next lesson."

"Very well." Harry turned to Selene. "I'll see you later, Selene."

"Of course," Selene smiled at him. "I look forward seeing you again in a few hours, amore."

XoX

Harry felt his bones crack as he stretched in his seat. The lesson Nicolas had given him was a very long one, having easily spanned well over the allotted 'few hours' of time Perennelle gave them. Despite having been in the alchemy lab for over five hours talking alchemy, Nicolas was still only have way through his lecture.

"We'll have to pick this back up again tomorrow," Nicholas told him, frowning a bit. He looked almost as disappointed about the lesson coming to an end as Harry was. Then again, this man lived and breathed alchemy so it was probably just him not liking the idea of not being able to discuss his lifes passion for as long as he liked before the misses came down and began growing feathers again. "If you're going to work on another transmutation circle, don't try combining more than three elements right now. As good as you are, I have yet to teach you everything you'll need to know to do the more complicated transmutations."

"Understood, I will be a bit more prudent when drawing up my circles," Harry said, standing up for the first time in five hours, wincing as he did so. Maybe stopping for today was a good idea after all. His bottom was actually feeling a little numb. "Master Flamel?"

"Hmm?"

"I was wondering if I could borrow the time turner for a day?"

"What's this? Borrow my time turner," Nicolas Flamel frowned at his apprentice. "Time is not something that should be trifled with, my young apprentice. You know that. Using the time turner more than once a day could cause problems that I would rather not deal with. I have no talent when it comes to space/time magics, and would rather not have to deal with a tear in the fabrics of time and space."

"I know, and I'll be careful, but I really need to borrow it," Harry pressed. When he saw that Flamel still did not look convinced, he added. "And it's just for one day."

Nicolas Flamel raised an eyebrow.

"And what do you need to use it for?"

"Ah, well," Harry took a breath. "You see, July 31st is coming up and, well, it's my birthday."

"I am well aware of that," Flamel replied dryly. "In fact, I do not think there is a single witch or wizard in western Europe who does not know that."

Harry flushed a bit, but continued on regardless.

"Normally, this wouldn't be much of an issue, but I find myself in a small... bind," he said carefully. "You see, for the past five years I have always spent my birthdays with Lisa Crawft, my muggle friend. I was going to do that this year as well, but I got a letter from the Dowager Longbottom, inviting me to celebrate a joint birthday party for myself and Neville, who also happens to have a birthday on the same month as I do." Harry was silent for a moment, then added. "And one does not refuse an invitation from the Dowager Longbottom."

Harry had heard stories of Neville's Gran. The woman was supposedly a hard case, a woman who could cause people to run away screaming with a mere look. She was also the leader of one of the few neutral parties who took a firmer stance in politics.

Because of this, Harry especially did not want to turn down an invitation from her and make it seem like his friendship with Neville and, just as importantly, that the Longbottom-Potter alliance meant nothing to him. He had to go.

"I still do not see the problem," Nicolas Flamel told him in a bland voice. Harry sighed. His teacher did understand his problem, but wanted Harry to spell it out for him. Probably in an attempt to annoy Harry.

"I cannot turn down an invitation from the Dowager Longbottom, but

knowing my friend as well as I do, she has already planned a surprise party for me. It would devastate her if I did not show up and I... I dislike the thought of hurting Lisa, however inadvertently. Please..." Harry bowed to the man. Not one of those incline of the head bows, but a full bow from the waist. "If you could grant me this one boon, I would never ask for another again."

Harry did not like doing this. He disliked showing this kind of deference to anyone. It meant this person was above him, better than him. And even if that was true, that did not mean he liked to admit it.

But he would do it. For Lisa if no one else. If meant she would be happy, he would swallow his pride and show such deference to another.

For what felt like hours to Harry, no one spoke a single word. The young heir to the Potter fortune could feel a wellspring of anxiousness bubble forth, making him sick to his stomach.

He knew he was asking for a lot. Harry understood how dangerous using the time turner more than once a day was. There was so much that could go wrong. Tears in time and space that could send him either forward or backwards hundreds of years. His entire body could be ripped to shreds and each piece misplaced in another time. His very existence could be erased, effectively changing the course of history and screwing up the present timeline. There were an infinite number of things that could go wrong. Harry understood this, Nicolas Flamel had lectured him on it quite a bit before letting him use the time turner.

At the same time, he could not in good conscience let either of his friends down by not showing up for a party where he was expected. These were not mindless sheep, a flock meant to be led and skinned for the fur they shed. They were his friends. To do such a thing to people who had earned his friendship and loyalty was anathema to him.

The sound of a door clicking drew Harry out of his stupor for a second. He looked over to the door, but upon seeing it still closed and locked from the inside, turned his attention back to Nicolas Flamel.

Finally, after an indeterminate amount of time, Nicolas Flamel sighed.

"You are very lucky I like you so much, apprentice."

Harry's posture straightened.

"You mean...?"

"Yes, I will allow you to borrow the time turner," when Flamel saw the joyous expression on Harry's face, he quickly held up a finger. "But, I want you to promise me that you will only use it twice. Once to turn back time for this party at the Longbottoms, and the other for your muggle friend. I am taking a big risk by letting you do this. Do not abuse my trust."

"I Promise."

"Very well then." And just like that, the stern expression from Flamel's face melted and the amused and slightly mocking grin Harry had grown used to appeared. "Now, I believe this is the part where I tell you to be responsible... or something like that, but I don't really care so I'm just going to tell you to enjoy your birthday... parties... how odd. Anyways, have fun. You only turn twelve once."

"Yes, Master Flamel, and thank you."

"Think nothing of it. I am only doing what I can to ensure my cute little apprentice doesn't feel bad for not showing up at either party."

Harry's right eye twitched.

He was not cute.

XoX

It was official, Harry hated magical transportation devices more than anything else in the world. He had disliked them before, but now he hated them. Truly hated them. How anyone could actually think of something like these retched creations was beyond him. They were the most dizzying, stomach churning, and all together unpleasant modes of travel he had ever had the displeasure of using.

And it seemed they hated him just as much as he hated them, for it almost seemed like each time he used a portkey, the experience got ten times worse.

His hatred of portkeys may have also had something to do with the way he landed in an undignified heap on the floor as he felt his stomach rebel and just barely managed to contain his breakfast, but that was neither here nor there. Harry wasn't one for such banal semantics.

"I had been told that you were rather ungraceful when using magical methods of transportation, but I had expected you to only be this bad when using the floo."

As the voice penetrated the fog that had gathered in his brain from the sickening experience gained from portkey travel, Harry Potter looked up to see a stern yet somewhat amused looking Augusta Longbottom and a grinning Neville.

"Alright there, Harry?" asked Neville as he held a hand out to help the young Potter heir up.

"I'm fine," Harry grabbed onto the hand and allowed his friend to pull him up. "Or I will be in a few seconds." He grimaced. "I don't think I'll ever get used to portkey travel. It's even worse than using the floo."

Remembering his manners, Harry turned to Augusta Longbottom and kissed the hand she proffered to him.

"It's a pleasure to see you again, Lady Longbottom."

"And you as well, Mister Potter," Augusta replied with a minimalistic nod. "I trust your summer has been enjoyable so far?"

"Very much so, thank you." With the proper introductory greeting with the Head of the family out of the way, Harry turned to Neville and smiled. "It's good to see you, Neville."

"Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, top of his class, can't travel using a portkey to save his life," Neville joked with a wry chuckle. Harry blinked, surprised by the confidence in his friend's voice. Was it because he was

at home that he was like this? Or because it was just them and no crowds of random strangers around?

"You seem to be much more confident these days," Harry decided to comment on it.

"Eh?" Neville shrugged a bit, and Harry could see some of his self confidence issues rise now that it had been mentioned. "I guess I've just been feeling a bit better about myself lately. I mean, my Gran and all my relatives were so proud about how high my grades were, I guess I've just been feeling good about myself, you know."

"That's good," Harry nodded. "Always remember it's important to feel pride in who you are. With pride comes confidence and by being confident you will be able to come into your true potential. Just be sure not to let confidence become arrogance, or that old saying 'Pride comes before the fall' may end up coming to bite you."

Neville shook his head and smiled.

"Already giving me speeches, Harry?"

Harry shrugged.

"Sorry, I can't help myself. It's become a bit of a habit, I think."

"I've noticed," Neville said a tad dryly.

"Neville," Augusta interrupted their conversation, bringing all attention on her. "Why don't you show Mister Potter around the manor. The rest of our guests will be showing up in about half an hour. Meet me in the lobby when you two are done."

"Alright Gran," Neville gestured for Harry to follow him. "Come on, I'll show you around. Longbottom Manor is a big place."

XoX

The party was officially in full swing. It was a very informal party, Harry noticed, featuring only Neville's immediate family, a few friends of

Augusta's, their children (if they had any) and the friends Neville and Harry had made during their time at Hogwarts.

The party was taking place within the ball room. It was a very long, rectangular room that was about half the size of the Great Hall at Hogwarts. The room was very tall, with a curved ceiling that held a mosaic of the Longbottom Coat of Arms. The image, made up of what Harry could only guess was millions of tiny pieces of jewels, had been animated so that the helmet would open and close every five minutes and the leafy patterns around the shield shifted and flowed as if caught in a breeze.

Augusta Longbottom had already introduced him to several members of their family, including Great Uncle Algie, who had nearly killed Neville several times trying to 'force some magic out of him'. To Harry, that was almost as bad as his relatives trying to 'stamp the magic' out of him.

It was no wonder then, that he was only as polite as needed when he had been introduced to the man.

Despite having met some of Neville's less than pleasant family members, it was nice being surrounded by his friends again.

"I'm telling you, this year is Puddlemere's year. They are going to rock the British and Irish Quidditch League."

Even if two of his friends were neck deep in a debate over which Quidditch team would do better during the coming season.

"And I'm telling you," Terry replied to Tracey's sycophantic remark about Puddlemere United. "I did some research on the line ups this year, and the Falmouth Falcons are definitely the ones to watch out for. They've got a new Seeker, and I've heard he's very good."

"The Falcons? Pshh. They were nearly beaten by the Canons last year in the fifth game of the season. What makes you think a new Seeker is going to make them do better when their Keeper sucks?"

"Is it strange of me to admit that I missed listening to them argue?" asked Lisa as she stood next to Harry, Hermione and Neville, all of whom were

standing off to the side as they watched the duo argue Quidditch.

Several feet away, standing near the food tables, were some of the older students who went to Hogwarts. Harry recognized all five of them; Penelope Clearwater, Cedric Diggory, Roger Davies and Euan Abercrombie. They had all spoken with the senior students for a while, but broke into smaller groups after words.

"Not really," Harry said, his eyes scanning the crowds. He could see Augusta Longbottom entertaining some of the older guests, political allies Harry figured. He recognized a few of the faces, five of them he had met at the New Year Gala during his first year. "I kind of missed this as well. Watching these two argue just makes me feel a sense of nostalgia."

"You sound like an old man," Lisa teased, causing Harry to snort in amusement before taking a drink of his pumpkin juice. He just managed to withhold a grimace at the taste of the liquid. Why was it that all witches and wizards felt the need to use pumpkin juice for their parties instead of punch?

"So Daphne couldn't show up, huh?" Harry changed the subject. He had been searching for his wayward friend, hoping she would show up. It was, he knew, a somewhat vein hope, but even though he had expected her not to show up, it was still disappointing.

"Doesn't look like it," Hermione took her attention off the debate between Tracey and Terry, which had now moved on to the 'my team's brooms are better than yours' debate in order to look around the room. "It's kind of expected though, isn't it? I mean, I saw her father and, well, I can't imagine someone so..." her face scrunched up like a chipmunk as she tried to find the correct word to describe Daphne's father. "... Stern, agreeing to let his daughter go to a party."

"That's not the reason he didn't let Daphne come," Harry corrected the girl. "It's political. Nathaniel Greengrass does business with a lot of, let's say, fringe families. Families that are considered true neutrals as they sided with neither the light nor the dark when Voldemort rose to power. Like the Zabinis. The Longbottoms are a strictly light sided family even though they are considered neutral. By allowing his daughter to attend,

he is essentially declaring which side his House is aligned with. If he did that, he may end up losing allies."

Harry wished they would have sent him his invitation at least a week in advance rather than a measly two days. He was sure that he could have convinced Nathaniel Greengrass to let his daughter attend his and Neville's party. The man would have done so if for no other reason than not granting the request of the Boy-Who-Lived was tantamount to political suicide right now, especially after his debut at the New Year Gala.

"But that's – that's ridiculous!" Hermione looked furious. "He won't let his daughter go to her friend's birthday party because he doesn't want to be seen as being allies with them! That's absolutely barbaric!"

"That's the way things are," Harry shrugged. "And I would suggest you keep your voice down. Especially if you are going to insult wizarding culture like that."

"But –"

"Hermione," Harry interrupted the girl before she could speak. "You must understand that the Wizarding World has been run this way for Centuries, even before the founding of the Ministry of Magic. And it's run this way because for the last couple dozen centuries or so it's worked."

"Actually, Wizarding politics have been the same since the late sixth century after Britain managed to come back from an era of depression due to the death of King Arthur and the razing of Camelot," Lisa corrected Harry with her more canonically correct historic knowledge. "Technically, it's been around thirteen hundred years since our world has become set in it's ways."

"Thank you," Harry nodded at the girl. It annoyed him a bit that she knew more than him, but he let it go since he was still reading up on wizarding history. "Anyways, while the politics in the muggle world may have advanced since then, the wizarding world's politics have not changed since that time. Magical Britain, most magical communities in fact, hold onto the belief that if it isn't broken, they don't need to fix it."

Hermione's expression looked thoughtful, yet pensive.

"I... I sort of get that, but still..."

"I am not saying that the way our world is run is necessarily right," once more, Harry decided to nip the girl's thoughts in the bud. He could already see where she was going with this. "Truth be told, I find some of the policies and laws in the wizarding world to be more than a little archaic, but by insulting the way we live, you are insulting the very culture of Magical Britain and the rest of the magical world as a whole. And if you want to get a good job after you graduate from Hogwarts, then the last thing you want to do is insult the heritage witches and wizards of England hold so dear."

This time, Hermione's expression was completely pensive.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that getting a good job in the wizarding world is not based on how good your grades were in school or how talented you are at magic, it's based on who you know. In other words, your connections. Why else do you think it is that Pureblood wizards are the ones who always get the best jobs even when they are not fully qualified for that job?"

Harry gestured over to the people Augusta was speaking with.

"You see those men Lady Longbottom is talking to? All of them are large figures in the wizarding world. Five of them were important enough that Minister Fudge invited them to the New Years Gala last year, and six of them are members on the Wizengamot. The one on the far left owns a very large company that imports magical goods from the Mainland, and the one with the large nose and spectacles owns sixteen different shops that sell magical goods like potions and potion ingredients."

"Now," Harry brought Hermione's attention back to him. Even Terry and Tracey had stopped arguing to hear what he had to say. "Do you think Lady Longbottom spends so much time and effort speaking with these people because she likes them?" Hermione looked thoughtful while Harry scoffed. "Of course not, most of those people she is indifferent to, and some of those people she probably outright dislikes. But she speaks with them anyways because by keeping these connections open she has a chance of helping her grandson make it big in both politics and, if he

chooses to, importing and exporting rare magical herbs."

Neville blinked, then looked over at his Gran with new found eyes.

"I hadn't realized she was doing that for me."

"I'm not surprised," Harry responded. "I only know those people because my... adviser in wizarding culture and law gave me a list of important people in certain industries and fields of study."

"So you're saying that muggleborns won't be able to get a good job without knowing people?" Hermione frowned. "That hardly seems fair."

"You're right, it's not, but that's life." Harry shrugged, as if to say 'what can you do?'. "Besides, it's the same way in the muggle world too. Most people get jobs because they know someone in the industry they want to get into and can get them to give the company they work for a referral. In that sense, the magical world and muggle world are pretty much the same."

It was interesting how even Purebloods such as Lisa, Neville and Terry knew so little about how the magical world actually worked. Though a part of this may have just been because they were too young to really be concerned with that yet. Harry suspected they would not be taught all this until they were nearing fifth year when they would have to take their OWLS. This knowledge would not truly become important until then.

Harry's friends turned introspective as a new piece of information they had not really known came to light.

Well, all of them except for Tracey, that is. She just wrinkled her nose as if smelling something horrid.

"Ugh, all this talk of politics and job searching is totally killing the mood," she declared. "So let's talk about something else. Did you know that Nimbus is coming out with a new broom?"

As Tracey Davis began going off about the Nimbus 2001, which apparently was even faster than the Nimbus 2000, Lisa and Hermione both groaned. They were not Quidditch or broom fans at all.

Harry merely chuckled. Leave it to Tracey to destroy any sense of distress and introspection with all the subtlety of a troll at a tea party.

XoX

Like every year during the thirty first of July, Harry spent almost his entire day with Lisa.

Technically, he spent his third day of July thirty first with Lisa, but getting into semantics over bending time twice in order to live a single day three times was not something Harry felt the need to get into.

They had done all the things they normally did together. Lisa had taken Harry out to get some pizza for lunch. It wasn't something he usually ate, but he sometimes would on special occasions like his or Lisa's birthday.

They had also gone to the British Science Museum which, ironically enough, had a special exhibition about astronomy that Terry would have loved to see called Cosmos & Culture. It was a rather fascinating exhibition that showed how astronomy changed the way people view the universe. The exhibition had contained many devices, both ancient and cutting edge that allowed one to trace the history of people and the stars through different stories drawn from around the world.

While not something Harry truly enjoyed, like chemical science, economics, magic and history, it was still something that managed to catch his attention and make him wonder if there was some way to apply muggle astronomy with wizarding astronomy.

An endeavor for another time, perhaps.

After the science museum, Misses Crawft took them both back home where the pair proceeded to sit on the couch watching movies while she cooked dinner.

"So what should we watch this time?" asked Lisa as she and Harry rummaged through the collection of movies they were allowed to watch. "You're the birthday boy so it's your choice."

Harry frowned as he looked over the selection. There weren't any movies

he really wanted to watch. At least, there were none that they had available. And he didn't feel like watching another movie over again.

That was another problem with eidetic memory. He had already seen all of these movies at least once and they were now permanently etched within his mind, and unlike Lisa or anyone else, he remembered everything that happened in them with perfect clarity. It made watching reruns dreadfully boring.

"How about..." Harry grimaced as he tried to find something that might be able to at least hold his attention. Finally, he grabbed a random video case and looked at it.

He blinked.

"When did you get this?" he asked, holding up the case to a new cartoon movie called Aladdin. This movie had not been there the last time he and Lisa sat down to watch a movie.

"Oh that," Lisa took the video from him and smiled. "Mum bought it for us a few days ago. I was going to ask if you wanted to watch but, well," she adopted a sheepish look, "I kinda forgot."

"You forgot?" Harry sighed, before allowing a small chuckle to escape his mouth. "It's good to know some things never change."

"Oi!"

"Why don't we watch it now then?" Harry suggested, taking the video back and putting it into the VCR. "I would rather watch something new than a bunch of movies I've seen one hundred times already."

Lisa rolled her eyes.

"Now that's a mighty big exaggeration if I ever heard one."

As the opening introduction to Arabian Nights began playing over a desert scene that soon ended up showing a cartoon version of a classical looking Arabic city with a large palace in the background, Harry and Lisa sat down on the couch. Once more, as soon as they sat down, Lisa, ever

the affectionate young girl that she was, quickly used this opportunity as an excuse to snuggle herself into Harry's side.

This time, however, something very different than what usually happens occurred.

In most cases, when Lisa cuddled against him, Harry would just accept the actions for what they were, a young girl wanting to be as close to her best friend as possible, and would act accordingly by hugging her back. By this point in time, it had literally become ingrained into his body to hug her back. He actually wondered if perhaps it had even become a muscle memory.

When Lisa cuddled up to him this time, Harry stiffened as his mind went into overdrive. It was like a much more mild version of what happened the first few times he had been with Selene, only, it was different at the same time. In either case, it was something that never happened before and something he couldn't describe.

"Harry?" Lisa frowned in concern as she turned her head to look at him. "Are you alright?"

"Yes," Harry quickly drew upon his Occlumency lessons and emptied his mind. It helped him relax, though his muscles were still a little tense, something his friend easily picked up on.

"Are you sure?" she pressed.

"Yes," taking a deep breath, Harry made his body relax into the couch even more. Feeling a bit better, he offered Lisa a smile. "I'm fine. Thank you for your concern."

Lisa Crawft spent another second or two studying him intently, before seeming to decide that whatever had just happened was a one time freak accident that wouldn't be happening again. With her concerns now quelled, she quickly burrowed herself into Harry's side, resting her head on his shoulder as she went back to watch the movie.

Harry on the other hand, was in a minor state of turmoil. Even though his body was now relaxed and his muscles loosened, his mind was a frenzy

of activity.

What had that been about? Never in his life had something like this happened before.

No. That wasn't quite true, was it? This had happened before. With Selene. His body had reacted to Lisa's closeness the same way it had Selene's whenever she had shown physical affection. Harry had assumed that the cause of this reaction was something unique to Selene, or perhaps something unique to the vampire race. But now it seemed like Lisa was garnering this same reaction now.

What did this mean?

XoX

The moment Harry appeared within the entryway to the Flamel Estate, he found himself being swept up by Selene, who locked her arms around his and began immediately leading him away.

Strangely enough, while his reaction was subdued now that he had grown used to Selene's antics, it was stronger this time than it had been yesterday. He wondered if this was due, in part, because of how he reacted to Lisa.

"Amore, you have been a very naughty young man." There was something about the way she said this that made Harry feel unsure of whether or not he should blush like some kind of school girl or shiver. Naturally, he ended up doing both.

"I am?" he asked, and was relatively pleased when he did not let the strange feelings that, for some reason, had overcome him stronger than they had been yesterday show. It meant that if nothing else, he was truly beginning to grow used to Selene's strange form of, he wasn't quite sure if it should be called physical affection, but he really couldn't think of anything else to describe it.

In either event, the fact that he was not turning into a blushing, stuttering mess meant he was growing less inclined to be bothered by her constant need for physical closeness.

Perhaps it was a form of desensitization, much like what was happening in the muggle world with shows on the tele getting more and more graphic and people growing more and more used to them. Though Harry preferred to think it was more a case of him growing past his immaturity and incapability of dealing with the situation properly.

"Yes," Selene said, smiling at him in an even stranger fashion than usual. It was still predatory, but there was something distinctly different about it. He would have continued to ponder this new look, but she spoke before his mind could truly delve into the mystery behind the slight variation in her smile. "You did not tell me it was your birthday yesterday."

At her words, Harry paled.

He hoped nothing unpleasant came from this. Considering her smile, he did not have much hope.

XoX

Harry wondered if all women possessed some kind of innate power over men. From all of the observations he had made, all signs pointed towards that being the case. Lisa's father rarely ever did anything to anger Misses Crawft and being delegated to 'the couch'. Whether this was a metaphorical couch or literally a couch Harry did not know. Tracey's was apparently 'whipped', and Nicolas Flamel was often seen walking on egg shells with his wife whenever he said something Perennelle deemed to be stupid.

Granted, his teacher sometimes deserved it. He did say stupid and sometimes downright insulting words quite often. Then again, maybe Harry was being biased because of all the times Flamel had commented on his young age in order to get him riled up.

Whatever the case may be, Harry had determined that women held some kind of power over men that simply made it so that the male species would do the bidding of the female species with little fuss. Sometimes it came in the form of a look, a glare, a smile, large doe eyes that simply made saying 'no' impossible. Other times it came in the form of actions, a hug, a touch, a vice grip of herculean proportions that made it feel like ones arm was being crushed by unfathomable amounts of pressure. In

Harry's case, it had been a combination of both.

Nicolas Flamel had given him the day off, claiming that since he was doing so well, he should take this time to relax.

"Have fun!"

Those had been his words right before Selene had dragged Harry away before the lecture planned for today could begin.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do!"

Those had been the words Nicolas Flamel had added just as he and Selene had disappeared around the corner. For some reason beyond his understanding, hearing those words had given Harry the inexplicable urge to punch the man in the face.

Now walking down the streets of muggle Paris with Selene on his arm, Harry found himself taking in some more of the sights. He had not been to the non magical portion of Paris since rescuing Selene from her would be killers-slash-rapist, and he had never been there during the day. It was a much different experience than walking around the city at night.

For one thing, it was much busier during the day than it was at night. All around him were people walking to and fro, chatting with friends as they moved about in large groups with a few singles and couples thrown in for good measure. The tables at the cafes were filled with people talking. There was a large number of cars driving down the street. Harry even saw several large, Double-Decker buses filled with tourists taking pictures of anything and everything as they pointed and gawked.

Harry would probably be considered a tourist as well, except he did not gawk.

"Are you going to tell me where we're going?" Harry asked finally as his patience began to wear thin. He had asked Selene that question when they first arrived in Paris and all she would say was that they were going to celebrate his birthday and he did not want to ruin the surprise.

It would not come as a surprise to those who knew him, but Harry did not

like the idea of just wandering around Paris when he could be back in Nicolas Flamel's alchemy lab unlocking the secrets behind transmutation. Even if his company was admittedly very pleasant.

Selene offered him a throaty chuckle. "Patience, amore," she said, leaning down without letting go of his arm so she could plant a kiss on his cheek. Harry scowled and turned away, more to hide the irritating hint of redness on his cheeks than for any other reason.

It seemed she still had a few tricks up her sleeve that she could use to get under his skin. He had not expected such a direct frontal assault like that.

Realizing he wouldn't get anywhere with her, Harry decided to focus on his surroundings while Selene led him to where ever she intended to take him.

His patience paid off, because less than five minutes later, Selene stopped outside of a movie theater.

Le Grand REX was a landmark of Art Deco style architecture. Built on the night of December eight in the early nineteen hundreds, it was considered one of the largest movie theaters in Paris and a national landmark.

Harry Potter found his gaze looking up at the top of the squarish building where a large tower sat. The tower was obviously built to inspire awe. It was a five story cylinder with eight pillars circling around it on all sides and another five growing inwards and getting taller as the tower grew in height. On each pillar was a headlight that Harry was sure would be on at night, shining their large rays of light particles to illuminate the big REX lights at the top. It was an impressive piece of work to be sure, more so since it was made so long ago when they did not have the construction equipment they do now.

"Come on," Selene said, dragging Harry's attention away from the architecture itself as she began leading him towards the building where a large line awaited them. Harry found himself very glad for his magically enhanced grace as it allowed him to keep up with Selene's supernatural gracefulness as she wove in between people in the crowd with little effort.

They soon found themselves standing in a long line with many other people who were waiting to get their turn at the ticket booth. Harry took another glance around the theater. Judging from the large poster above them and just below the tower, the most prominent film they were playing was Bram Stoker's Dracula, which was a movie that had just come out in theaters and was based on the 1897 book Dracula written by Bram Stoker.

"We're going to see Dracula?" Harry looked over at Selene, a single eyebrow raised questioningly. Selene smiled at him.

"It will be interesting to see what humans think of my kind."

"You do know that this movie is rated 18, right?" Harry frowned at her. Selene's smile just widened.

"Do not worry about that, amore," once again, Selene gave him a kiss on the cheek. Harry was pleased that he barely even twitched this time, though his cheeks did heat up some. "You leave getting into the movie theatre to me."

Harry was not sure what was more worrying, how perturbing her statement was, or the smile she had plastered on her face. Both were enough to cause a small feeling of trepidation to burrow it's way in his stomach and settle in his gut.

He could only hope she wasn't planning on doing something that would get them in trouble. He did not want to have to use his magic in front of all these people to get out of trouble.

Selene's plan soon became clear when they were the second to last people in line and Harry saw the person manning the ticket booth. It was a male somewhere around his late teens to early twenties. He was your average looking French male, nothing very noteworthy about him. His looks did not matter anyways. It was his gender that mattered.

As soon as they got up the front of the ticket booth and before Selene could even open her mouth, Harry stepped in front of her.

"I would like two tickets please," Harry switched to flawless French as he

spoke, his voice pulsing with magic as the young Potter heir opened up the gates keeping his magic sealed away just a smidgen. What he was doing wasn't really a spell, but more like a direct application of his magic. Essentially, he was enforcing his will on another with his magic. He called it 'The Power of Persuasion'.

It was a technique he did not use very often, mainly because he did not really need it. Harry would also admit he preferred not to use it on people for the sole reason that he should not need to. His words and the conviction he spoke them should be enough to convince anyone of the validity and rightness of what he was saying.

Still, a part of him could not help but be amused at the way the man's eyes glazed over. Watching as the older teen's face became slack made him feel like a Jedi.

If only Lisa could see him do this.

"Of course," the man droned, his hands automatically passing over two tickets to Harry. *"That will be 22 francs."*

Harry was about to pull out his wallet when Selene stopped him.

"I've got this, amore," she said, reaching into the small black leather purse she had brought with her. Pulling out exactly twenty two francs worth in bank notes, she set the money on the counter, grabbed the two tickets, then wrapped both of her arms around Harry's right one again and began leading him off.

Harry was very proud of himself when he only released a minor shiver as Selene pressed his arm in between her well developing bust.

Still, there had to be something wrong with him. He was beginning to feel incredibly hot, and there was a strange temptation to take this girl attached to his arm and do... something to her. He wasn't sure what, but the desire was there, and it bothered him.

He really needed to sort these feelings out.

"You were amazing back there, amore," Selene said. Harry twitched only

slightly when he saw the smile on her face. For some reason, seeing that smile made him think he had just fallen into a trap she had set for him. "I was impressed with how well you can do wandless magic. I almost didn't notice you using it to effect the rest of the crowd into making them forget we were there."

"You shouldn't be," Harry told her. "I've seen you do the same thing."

They soon entered Le Grand REX theater's main lobby. It was as impressive on the inside as it was on the outside. Dark red carpeting covered most of the floor and the dim lights from small chandeliers overhead set the mood. There were a number of posters featuring the movie that would be playing in the largest theater they had today, further emphasizing the whole classic theater vibe that Le Grand REX gave off.

"What I did was far different than what you did," Selene informed him as they both gave their tickets to the usher who looked at the pair incredulously when he realized they were far below the legal age limit to watch the movie they had bought tickets for.

A wave of Harry's hand and the man was staring blank faced as they moved past him.

It also did not escape Harry's notice that he had been using magic when he didn't want to. To him, it was a small price to pay when the alternative would have been letting Selene do what she did to that waiter.

"How so?" asked Harry as they walked over to the concession stand.

"For one, you used magic," Selene answered. Harry cast a minor bubble around them that would muffle their conversation to anyone not within it's sphere of influence, meaning no one but he and Selene could hear what the other was saying. It would not do for people to listen into this conversation. "I do not use magic to persuade people into doing what I want. Or rather, I can't."

Harry frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I have magic, but I can't actively use it. Vampires cannot use magic like witches and wizards can. We can only use it for blood rituals and the like." They stepped up to the concession stand after the person in front of them finished ordering. "What would you like?"

"I can pay for my own food," Harry grumbled a bit as he absently dispelled the bubble around them. He knew he was being a tad petulant, but he did not like feeling indebted to others.

"You could," Selene gave him an indulgent smile. "But since this is your birthday, it is my treat today. Now, what would you like?"

Harry sighed before listing off his order, a small coke and a bag of popcorn. He didn't normally like theater food, but seeing as Selene was right in a semantical sense as they were celebrating his birthday even though that had technically been yesterday, he decided to get something that was not really healthy for him.

"I would like one large coke and a large popcorn," Selene ordered, causing Harry to frown. He was still frowning when their order came and Selene had him carry the drink while she carried the popcorn, something she did not fail to notice. "It would enhance the experience if we just shared food and drink together, wouldn't you agree?"

Harry did not agree, but he also did not say anything. He did not want to cause a scene by telling her otherwise. There was no telling what she would do if he were to let her in on the truth of his feelings.

Unbidden, an image of Selene pressing her lips against his cheek as she held him close came to his mind. He flushed and tried his best to dispel the image to the deepest recesses of his mind by remembering his Occlumency lessons. It worked, but only partially.

It did not help that Selene had grabbed onto his hand, entwining their fingers together and walking close enough to him that their shoulders touched (Harry was almost as tall as her). It seemed that her entire reason for making them each carry one item was so that she could still hold onto some part of his body.

"Of course, being a pureblood, my magic works slightly differently than

other vampires," Selene continued where they left off, forcing him to recast his spell. Harry was grateful as it gave him something to focus on other than the innocent if slightly erotic images his mind was conjuring up. "My magic enhances my body naturally. Most vampires are only as strong as the blood they drink, meaning they only gain special properties if they drink the blood of a witch or wizard."

Selene smiled proudly as she pointed to herself.

"I was born with magic, which means I do not need to drink the magic of someone magical in order to gain any special properties, though doing so may boost my own natural abilities."

"I see," Harry was very interested in what she was saying. Her words were easily causing the scholar in him to come out. "What special abilities do you have?"

"As I said, my magic enhances my body. I'm sure you've noticed that I am much stronger than any other fourteen year old girl you've met." Harry snorted, she was much stronger than any full grown man he had met. "While all vampires are naturally stronger than a normal human and witches and wizards, I am much stronger, and I can move faster, my reflexes are better, I have perfect hand to eye coordination. Basically, everything about me has been enhanced beyond what anyone else could hope to match be they vampire or otherwise."

"Except for another pureblood," Harry added.

"Yes, though their abilities might be different than mine," Selene looked slightly pensive at the thought of the other purebloods. "Not much is known about the other twenty six. At least, our coven knows very little about them. They may have properties completely different to my own. There is so little known about us because of our scarcity and how secretive most purebloods are."

"You've been fairly forthcoming with information on yourself," Harry pointed out the small folly in her words. Selene just gave him a smile, one that was not in any way predatory but filled with an emotion Harry actually understood.

Gratitude.

"I trust you," was her simple reply. For some reason, those three words made Harry feel innately pleased with himself, though he did not fully understand why.

They soon reached their seats, which was on the second floor. Harry had to admit that the theater room was impressive. Very impressive. He had been to movie theaters before, but none that were this large.

Le Grand REX was an atmospheric movie theater. It featured an auditorium ceiling meant to give the illusion that they were sitting under an open night sky. The feature was well done, though not on the level of the ceiling within the Great Hall at Hogwarts.

The rest of the theater was equally impressive. The room resembled that of a Mediterranean courtyard complete with interior fountains, statues, reliefs designed in the walls and vines hanging down from the Mediterranean stage architecture that had been built to act as a wall for the theater on either side.

Aside from featuring Mediterranean architecture and a night sky overhead and having two thousand eight hundred seats, Le Grand REX also featured the largest screen in all of Europe. Harry did not know how large the screen was, but he could take an educated guess just based on the size of the curtains that were being hung by the large archway over the stage.

Did Bram Stocker's Dracula really rate being viewed in such a large place?

Since the movie would not begin for another fifteen minutes, Harry decided to readdress the topic they had been on before Selene started explaining how her powers worked.

"So, if you didn't use any kind of magic, just how did you manage to procure that bottle of wine at Maxim's?"

"That? I just used my natural beauty and a little sex appeal," Selene gave him a fang filled grin to express her self satisfaction at what she had

done. "You would be surprised at how easy it is for someone like me to manipulate men. Show off a little skin, give a flirtatious smile and voila, men will be eating out of the palm of my hand."

Harry blinked once, twice, thrice. His mind turned over her words, dissecting them in a way only he could and coming to a startling conclusion about what she did to the man in the restaurant.

"You seduced him."

In colloquial language and fictional literature, seduction was the process of deliberately enticing a person, to lead astray, as from duty, rectitude, or the like; to corrupt, to persuade or induce to engage in sexual behaviour. The word seduction stemmed from Latin and literally meant "to lead astray". The term Seduction was often seen negatively and involved temptation and enticement, often sexual in nature, to lead someone astray into a behavioral choice they would not have made if they were not in a state of sexual arousal.

"Seduced is such a harsh word," Selene hummed, not at all bothered by the accusatory tone in Harry's voice. "I would prefer to call it using the assets available to me in order to convince others that I should be allowed to do something I may not otherwise be able to do according to the law or some form of moral ambiguity."

Blinking several times at the very long and wordy explanation that essentially was her not denying she had seduced the waiter at Maxim's, Harry came to another startling realization.

"Is this what you've been doing to me?" Was this what she had been doing since they had first met? All those smiles, all those touches, caresses and silken words, had they all been given to him in order to seduce him? The thought that this might actually be the case was surprisingly hurtful. It felt almost like someone had stabbed a dagger into his chest.

"Why would you think that?" Selene asked, looking genuinely pained by his words. She placed a hand over his, the one resting on the armrest nearest to her, in reassurance. He flinched, but was unable to jerk his hand away because she already had a firm grip on it.

Damn vampire strength.

"It is true, what I have been doing to you is a form of seduction," she admitted softly. "But I did not do so out of any desire to corrupt or influence you... beyond getting you out of that dungeon Nicolas calls an alchemy lab." Once more, Harry couldn't contain a flinch at her words, which Selene noticed.

She brought his hand up to her face, forcing his hand to cup her cheek. His warm, calloused hand caressed her equally warm face. The silken smoothness skin of her cheeks presented a stark contrast to his rough palm and digits.

"Not all uses of seduction are bad, you know," Selene presented him with a new smile, something he had not yet seen from her, or anyone else for that matter. Her eyes had become incredibly... soft, he supposed the correct word was. Her lips were turned upwards in an honest smile, one filled with genuine affection.

It was a look that sort of reminded him of the look Lisa gave him in some ways, and a look he had occasionally seen breaking through Daphne's cold facade, but it was different as well. Stronger. That was the word. This look she was giving him was stronger than the ones he got from Daphne and Lisa.

"Then why..." Harry swallowed. Why was his mouth so dry? "Why have you been doing this to me?"

"Didn't I already tell you."

Selene's smile grew.

"You are my amore, my hero. You rescued me from those vile men who would have killed me because of what I am. You took care of me when I was unconscious for no other reason than it was the right thing to do. You don't care that I am a vampire, or that I am related to an infamous murderer. The only thing that matters to you is who I am. Not the pureblood vampire, or the heiress to the House of Dracul, but me, Selene Gallio."

Harry's breath hitched when Selene brought his palm over her mouth and pressed her lips against it. Her mouth was incredible warm and soft and slightly moist, but that just made her lips on his skin feel unusually pleasant. It felt like his palm was being lightly caressed with acromantula silk.

"And I am incredibly grateful to you."

He could not see her mouth, but her eyes were smiling at him.

"More than you could ever know."

So... my last chapter did not get anywhere near as many reviews as my previous ones and I was just wondering; did you guys not like chapter 6? That's the only reason I could think of to explain why I received less than half the reviews I've been getting.

If something is wrong with my story, or if there is something you don't like, please do not hesitate to tell me. Contrary to popular belief, if someone tells me something is wrong and it makes sense, I will actually change it. At the very least I will take what you say into account so that I do not make the same mistake again. This story will never get any better if you guys don't tell me when I do something you don't like.

Also, do not forget to check out and join my blog: Thoughts and Wonderings of a Fanfiction Writer. When you guys ask questions, this is the place I answer them. I also have status updates, random facts, and enjoy proclaiming my own awesomeness there, so you know it's bound to be good. Or at least amusing. The link to my blog is on my profile.

Hormones?

Chapter 8: Hormones?

Something had changed between us. I don't necessarily know what it was that had caused this change, or even what this change was. Even so, I could tell that there was some kind of shift in the strange relationship I had with Selene.

Nor do I know whose end this change come from. Did it come from me? Or did it come from Selene? I didn't know. Strangely enough, the fact that I could not figure this out didn't bother me as much as I thought it would. As much I thought it should.

The two of us just finished watching the movie Bram Stoker's Dracula about half an hour ago, and now we were sitting at a small open air cafe eating sandwiches and drinking tea and a cappuccino respectively.

I must confess, during the entire time we were in that theater, my focus had not been on the movie, but on the girl next to me. Not long after the movie had started, Selene had decided to lace her fingers with mine in a way similar to how Lisa sometimes holds my hand. Of course the feelings I got were different than what I felt when doing that with Lisa, which probably contributed to my inability to pay attention to the movie.

There were other instances that kept me from focusing on the movie as well, like when I went to grab a handful of popcorn and her other hand would just so happen to be there to touch mine, or when I leaned over to take a sip of coke and Selene would be conveniently drinking from the other straw at the same time and our noses would be practically touching. Small moments like that, that drove me to distraction and kept me from truly focusing on the movie.

Were it not for the fact that I have eidetic memory, I am one hundred percent positive I would have never remembered anything that happened in the movie. As it was, I did know, but only because my mind refuses to let me not know and remember something that happens within my

presence that I can see or hear.

Again, it was strange, but where once her antics might have bothered me, or simply been something I humored her with because I just couldn't bring myself to care anymore, this time I found myself somewhat enjoying her actions. It was like a little game between us. She would try to see if she could crack through my facade, while I would try to keep myself from allowing her to break me out of my carefully constructed mask. It was an enjoyable game, even if I didn't truly understand why we were playing it or why it was enjoyable.

When the movie ended, we left, which brought us to where we were now, sitting down, enjoying a lunch in Paris.

"Are you rubbing your foot against my leg?" I asked incredulously as the girl in front of me gave a coy smile.

"Perhaps."

My eye twitched. That was definitely her foot rubbing against my pant leg.

"Why are you rubbing your foot against my leg?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

I sighed.

"Of course you don't."

"Have you enjoyed your birthday so far?"

"I have, surprisingly," I admitted. It wasn't as hard an admittance as it might have once been. The truth was I had a surprising amount of fun today.

It was so strange since before I couldn't be in the same room as this girl without feeling completely confused and inadequate, two emotions I never enjoyed feeling at the best of times and hated feeling when they were combined like that.

"Surprisingly?" Selene raised a delicate eyebrow. "Don't tell me you didn't think you'd enjoy yourself with me? I might cry."

"Oh please," I shot back. I was surprised I actually could talk back. Not only because the foot she had taken to rubbing against me was distracting, which I believed she was doing on purpose for that very reason, but also because I simply wasn't the type to talk back. "You're not fooling anyone, least of all me."

"Hmm... it seems you're beginning to learn," Selene gave me an approving smile. It was a smile that turned coy a second later. "And now that we have had a chance to enjoy your birthday together, I believe it is time for me to give you your birthday gift."

"Ah..." I suddenly felt very uncomfortable. Selene had already done quite a bit for me; taking me out to the movies, keeping me from driving myself to exhaustion because I was too stubborn to give up on something without a push (yes, even I could admit when I was doing something stupid), teaching me what she knew of Vampire Culture. I didn't feel comfortable receiving a gift when I had already, admittedly, received more than I first realized. "You don't have to."

"No one ever has to," Selene countered. "They do so because they want to. Just like I want to give you a gift."

I wondered if she knew that I had used a very similar but much more long winded and wordy argument against Perennelle the night she and I met (though perhaps I should call it the night I met her since she was pretty much unconscious except for that one instance where she woke up). If I had won that argument, I would have never rescued Selene in the first place and we never would have. She would have been dead.

It was almost funny how life's coincidences sometimes worked out.

"Well... alright," I conceded. I could have argued further, but that would not have gotten us anywhere. Selene was surprisingly stubborn, and I just didn't care enough to keep arguing when I know she would just argue back. Better to just concede and let her give her gift. It would save me the hassle of arguing over something so pointless. "So, what is this gift?"

"I have two gifts," Selene admitted. Now I was intrigued. "The first is —"

"Lady Selene!"

At the sound of Selene's name being called, she and I both jerked our heads in the direction of the voice.

Coming towards us were two people I had never seen before, women. Vampires. I could tell right away. Their skin was pale, as if this was the first time they had ever stepped foot into the sun. Their eyes were much like Selene's, not in the color, Selene's was silvery blue while theirs was a pale green, but in the glow. They looked like sisters, with the same blond hair, same tall and elegant stature, even their facial features were nearly identical with the only difference being that the one on the left had her eyes shaped a bit differently.

Their clothing was surprisingly normal from what I had been expecting from vampires. Maybe it was because I only knew Selene, but I had been expecting that other vampires also enjoyed wearing ridiculously expensive clothing. What these two were wearing shot those beliefs out of the water.

Of course, saying their clothes were normal did them no justice. They were not normal by any definition of the word. They just didn't look like they cost thousands of pounds for a single article.

The one on the left was wearing an all black business that covered her from the neck down. Everything except for her head was hidden. She was even wearing gloves. The girl on the right, however, was wearing something I could imagine some hillbilly from the states would wear; a white button up shirt that was several sizes too small, ending just above her solar plexus, and tied together by the ends just under her very large breasts, leaving a sizable gap that allowed me to easily see the inner sides of her breasts. Wrapped around her well defined hips was a checkered mini skirt that did nothing to cover her legs, and halter top shoes that gave her about four inches over the other girl. She was wearing her hair in pigtails, while the other had her's done up in a tight bun behind her head.

"Therese! Jeanette!" Selene exclaimed in shock, her eyes widening. I

raised a single eyebrow.

"You know these two?" I asked. It was a rhetorical question, but Selene answered anyways.

"Their servants who work for my father. I wonder how they found me."

"Oh Selene!" The pigtailed woman squealed as she ran forward. Selene barely had time to stand up before she was engulfed in what looked like a back breaking hug.

No really. I think I actually heard Selene's back crack, though it could be my imagination. I hoped it was at any rate.

"Oh~ I'm so happy your safe!" The woman was gushing as she squeezed the life out of Selene, who she had picked up off the ground, the younger vampire's feet now dangling several feet above the sidewalk. "When you didn't show up at the check point we feared the worst!"

"Ugh... hurk..." Selene looked like she was struggling to speak. "I'm... pleased to see you... too. Now, Put... me... down!"

The blond woman in pigtails did, allowing Selene regain her bearings. That was when the other female walked up, her hands on her hips and a no nonsense attitude about her person. She reminded me of Professor McGonagall.

"And just where have you been?" Selene looked sheepish, but the woman didn't give her time to answer. "You've had everyone worried sick. The entire coven is in an uproar and looking for you! Why didn't you head to the check point like you should have?"

"They caught me."

The two girls sucked in a breath at the same time.

"Did they...?" the one who looked like a hillbilly started. Selene shrugged.

"They tried."

"How did you escape?" asked the other one, the one wearing the business suit.

"I was rescued," at this, Selene smiled and quickly grabbed onto my hand, pulling me from my seat where she proceeded to wrap her arms around my arm. "This is my amore. He rescued me from the mercenaries who managed to track me while I was on my way to the checkpoint."

The two shifted their gaze from Selene to me. The one in the business suit gave me a stern once over, seemingly focused on my posture and clothes. I wasn't worried about her, it was the other one I was concerned about.

She was looking at me like a piece of meat.

"So cute..."

Very concerned.

Knowing that it would be rude not to introduce myself after Selene had given me the opportunity, I inclined my head respectfully.

"Harry Potter. Pleased to meet you both."

They sucked in their breaths again. Or at least appeared to. For different reasons this time.

"Yes," Selene smiled before they could even open their mouths. "He is The Harry Potter." I could almost hear the capitalized T when she spoke.

"And he rescued you?" the stern looking one asked, her eyes now giving me a second look. I got the feeling she was reevaluating her opinion of me. Just what that opinion was, I didn't have a clue.

"Oooh~ that is so romantic!" The other one gushed. She clasped her hands under her chin and I could almost see hearts forming in her eyes. I have to admit, I was a tad frightened. "It's just like those novels I read. The Prince comes to rescue his princess at the last second, saving her from the evil villain, then they fall in love and have hot, passionate sex!"

Correction: I was very frightened. I could just tell from that single statement that this girl was worse than Lisa ever could be.

Though, thinking about how I rescued Selene, she did kind of have a point. Selene was a princess, sort of, and I had rescued her at the last second. At least I rescued her chastity at the last second. I don't know much about their being an evil villain, but those mercenaries were certainly not a pleasant sort. The only thing that was missing from her description was...

Oh no. No, no, no, no. It couldn't be like that. There was no way my life could possibly be like one of those horrible, trashy, god forsaken novels Lisa reads so much. I refused to believe it. Those novels were not conducive to how relationships went. That's why they were fiction!

I glanced down at Selene, still attached to my arm. I flushed.

"Oh! And he's blushing! How cute!"

"Selene," the stern woman interrupted her giggly counterpart before she could keep going. I found myself grateful to her. It gave me a chance to recoup and recover. "Perhaps you can tell us why you were not at the checkpoint. It has been a little over a month since you've disappeared. Surely the time needed to recover from any injuries you sustained have long since passed."

It was in this moment that I got to see another side of Selene. That of a girl who had just had her hand caught in a cookie jar. The young vampire was giving the business suit wearing female a very guilty look, like she knew she had been caught doing something she shouldn't have, but was still trying to cover it up. It was dreadfully amusing, and terribly cute.

Wait. What?

"I forgot."

"You forgot?" the woman raised an eyebrow. The hillbilly girl remained silent, content to let this play out.

Selene looked away, unable to withstand her gaze.

"...Yes."

The stern woman pinched the bridge of her nose, as if to stem the tide of a coming headache.

"Am I to assume that the young... man you are with is the reason you forgot?"

Selene glanced at me, and I once more had the pleasure of seeing her blush. Blood rose to her cheeks in mass quantity until much of her face was red.

She quickly looked away.

"I see..." the woman mused, eying me once more, this time with minor hostility. I met her gaze evenly, raising my head just a bit. It might not have been the smartest move I ever made, matching glares with a vampire, but I would not allow myself to be intimidated by this woman. I've had enough of being frightened by women from Perennelle.

After a few seconds of our staring contest, the female vampire in the business suit snorted and broke her gaze off. I chalked this up as my win.

"Very well. I suppose we shall let bygones be bygones," the woman decided. "He did save you after all." I narrowed my eyes. "Now, come along Selene. Your father has been frantic with worry for you."

I almost missed it, the way Selene's eyes tightened at the mention of her father. I wondered if she and her father were not on good terms.

"I will come with you in just a minute," Selene informed them. When the woman turned a heated look on her, she just raised her head and gave a glare of her own, daring the woman to challenge her. "It's my amore's birthday today, well, yesterday, but I am celebrating it today. And, I have yet to give him his birthday presents."

"Oooh! Presents!" Unable to contain herself any longer, the hillbilly squealed happily. "What are you gonna give him? Is it a kiss? Tell me it's a kiss!" She was definitely worse than Lisa.

The business woman sighed.

"Very well," she conceded. "But make it quick. This sun has finally started burning through our sunscreen and I do not wish to feel it's effects on my skin."

Selene smiled at them.

"Of course."

Letting go of my arm, she turned to me and took two steps back. With her back turned to the two women they could not see her face, but I could.

She was smiling. Not that haughty smirk or the predatory smile, but the one I had seen in the theater and after I had given her my blood to drink.

My heartbeat quickened.

"My first gift is this."

Reaching around her neck, I saw her pull out a necklace that she must have been hiding underneath her clothes. I had occasionally got glimpses of what looked like a chain hidden beneath her shirt, but this was the first time I had it confirmed.

The two women behind Selene gasped as the girl pulled out a platinum necklace with a blood red gem shaped like an oval on it. The gem was encased in a gold band that surrounded it, and the light from the sun sent refracting beams along it's surface. Even though I was not a jeweler by any means of the word, I could tell that this was not made through natural processes.

"Lady Selene, you can't be serious." The stern woman spoke up once again. The hillbilly seemed to have gone catatonic.

Selene turned her head.

"I am dead serious."

The woman looked ready to start lecturing.

"If your father hears about this he —"

"Will do nothing!" Selene whirled around, facing the two women with a hiss. I had just managed to catch a glimpse of the shifting emotions on her face. The way her eyes narrowed dangerously and the snarl on her lips. She was angry. "He cannot decide who I can give my bloodstone to! That is my right and mine alone! And neither you, nor my father, nor the gods be damned originator can tell me who I can and can't give it to!"

The two woman looked incredibly startled by this sudden display of anger. I was startled by this display of anger. In the time I have known her, I had seen Selene act in many different capacities with many different emotions. I've seen her playful, I've seen her surprised, I've seen her shocked, happy, grateful, endearing, shy, embarrassed and many other emotions. But in all the time I had known her, about a month and a week, I had never seen her angry.

My body began to respond.

Oh no. Oh no. Oh please god no. Don't tell me this is what's been happening to me. I'm too young, it's too soon. I'm not ready!

Heedless to my rising horror, the business woman continued to plead her case.

"Lady Selene, see reason. Your bloodstone isn't something you should give to just anyone. There are only twenty seven of those in the entire world."

"You don't have to tell me that!" Selene hissed, still angry. I paled when my pants began to feel very tight at her tone. Dear sweet god, this couldn't be happening! "I know everything there is to know about bloodstones! Do not forget that I am the one who created it!"

She turned to look at me and smiled. I felt like my body might suddenly spontaneously combust from overheating.

This was not good. Really not good.

"And Harry isn't just anyone," Selene turned to glare at the two again.

"You two could never truly understand what he's done for me. If there is someone worthy of receiving this, it's him."

"My lady Selene..." the stern one tried to argue again, but Selene was having none of it.

"If you continue to argue with me, Therese, I will challenge you to trial by combat over this." The woman's entire body went stiff as a board at the same time the hillbilly's eyes widened almost comically. I was just glad to finally know who was who. It gave me a chance to focus on something other than the way my body was reacting in a way it shouldn't yet.

When neither women spoke up, and Therese began looking uncomfortable, Selene nodded, satisfied.

"Do not forget, dear sisters, that I am stronger than you both."

I don't know what surprised me more. Selene's words about her being stronger, or that she called them her sisters. Weren't they supposed to be servants? Or was this a part of vampire culture I was as of yet unaware of?

She turned back to me. Thankfully, by this point in time I had managed to at least hide my reaction to her by shifting my pants.

"Here," Selene took the chain and placed it around my head, letting it settle with the bloodstone against my chest. She placed a hand on my chest, right next to where the stone was now nestled. I could feel the warmth of her skin through the fabric of my clothes. "So long as you have this on you, we will most definitely meet again."

"Ah... Um..." They was certainly not the most eloquent words I had ever spoken, but I think I can be excused this one time. Thankfully, I did manage to recover my voice enough to give a proper response eventually. "Are you sure you should give this to me? I don't want you to get in trouble with your father or anything..."

Selene's eyes narrowed for a moment, before disappearing behind her smile.

"Do not worry about my father," she said confidently. "I will deal with him."

I frowned. She didn't sound as confident as she usually did. A part of me wanted to argue with her, since it was obvious she felt some trepidation at the thought of facing her father, but I also didn't want to injure her pride, which this girl seemed to have a lot of.

In the end, I decided to accept the gift. I'll even admit that knowing she was willing to risk getting in trouble with her father to give this bloodstone to me made me feel very strange. Warm. Among other things.

"And now," she smiled, "for my second gift."

This time, I did open my mouth to protest. She had already given me something that was apparently very precious. Anymore would be too much.

"Selene, I really don't think this is necessar — Mmmph!"

My words were hampered. I couldn't have said them even if I wanted to.

Because Selene had just kissed me.

Selene had just kissed me and it was unlike anything I had ever experienced before in my life. I had heard about kissing, with a friend like Lisa how could I not? But I had never really put much stock into all the hype. To me, kissing was just the act of two lips touching and an exchange of saliva. It actually sounded kind of disgusting.

But now I knew. I could now comprehend why Lisa always went to such great lengths to describe those kissing scenes in her novels, and why she would sigh so dreamily whenever she finished reading one of those parts. I understood why so many of the older students talked about which girl they were snogging, a very derogatory term for kissing, in the Hogwarts broom closet. I finally understood the reason behind the hype.

Kissing felt good.

Everything around me seemed to dissolve until I could see nothing but the girl in front of me, whose hands were on either side of my face as she

gave me my first kiss. I could focus on nothing else but her lips as they were pressed against mine. I had always known those lips were soft. They had been like silk when pressed against my hand or cheek, but I don't think any of those pecks truly gave an accurate analysis on just how soft her lips were. Even if my brain did not feel like it was being fried beyond repair, I don't think I could have properly described how soft her lips were.

And then the kisses ended.

I blinked.

Brown eyes were staring back at me.

"You see, Harry," said Lisa, smiling. "I told you kissing was amazing. This is what you get for not listening. Now, why don't you pucker up for another one."

XoX

Like a man who had just been rescued from drowning, Harry Potter awoke with a gasp. His eyes were wide and unseeing as his body shot up into a sitting position, flickering around frantically as if expecting to see either Selene or Lisa, or both in his presence. Harry shuddered at the thought of seeing them both.

As cognizant thought began to return to his frantic mind, Harry realized that neither Selene nor Lisa were there, and that 'there' was actually his bedroom. His enhanced vision could easily make out the brand new desk and comfortable renaissance style chair he had made using alchemy, as well as the the armoire where he kept all his clothes.

His body began to relax. That's when he noticed something else.

Looking down, Harry found that he had made an absolute mess of his bed sheets. A very sticky mess that was not just made from an accumulation of sweat.

Harry could not quite contain the groan escaping his lips as he pressed a hand to his sweaty face. This was the second time in two days he'd

dreamed of that memory, the memory of Selene's departure.

It was also the second time he had made a mess of his sheets, which was a problem he was really hoping to solve. He had a theory behind why this was happening, but he really, *really* didn't want to go there until he was one hundred percent positive that his hypothesis was correct.

For perhaps the first time in his life, Harry was hoping he was wrong.

While this had not been the first time he had dreamed of the day Selene left, this was the first time Lisa had invaded that dream. She had not done so the last time, so why had she done so this time?

Without warning, Harry's mind conjured up a perfect image of Lisa wearing a short denim skirt, sandals and a tang top. Her brown hair was let down, framing her cute face with her doe-like eyes, small nose and soft lips. The skirt she was wearing showcased her athletic legs gained from three years of dance lessons, and the tang top showed off her developing... developing...

Harry's cheeks began heating up. At the same time, the sheets covering him formed a small tent.

Gods, there must be something wrong with him, thinking about Lisa like... like... like that! She was like his little sister! Not... well, not someone he saw in that particular light. Like someone he was inclined to love romantically. She was practically family!

Wanting to dispel these thoughts, Harry quickly began practicing some of the more advanced forms of Occlumency meditation. Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out. Conjure an image of something plain, something that can be pictured easily. A grassy plain under a clear blue sky that stretched out for miles before dipping far beyond the event horizon and showing blue snow capped mountains in the distance. Nothing else existed except that plain and those mountains.

Taking one more deep breath, Harry felt some of the... tension in his pants bleed out. The problem was still there, but he had read that a cold shower would fix that. Which was why his next stop was the bathroom.

As Harry stepped into the ice cold water and began going through the meticulous process of cleaning himself, his mind began wandering.

He needed help. That much was clear. While Harry had an idea of what was wrong with him, he really wanted someone else to confirm it before he decided what his next step would be.

Of course, he wasn't going to actually mention what he was going through. There was no way he was going to tell someone about the dreams he's been having of Selene's departure, of that incredible kiss she had given him. It was bad enough he had to ask for help in dealing with this matter, nothing on this good green earth would convince him to actually admit he might be having a problem.

There was still the matter that he needed to talk to someone, an expert in wizarding biology and growth. This was not a problem he could solve on his own without acquiring more information.

Fortunately, he knew someone who could help him. Someone he had met last year at the New Year Gala. He just had to send her a message and schedule an appointment.

XoX

Saint Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries was the only magical hospital within all of Britain. That was not to say that it was the only place for treatment for magical injuries and maladies. Purebloods often had their own private medical staff for anything not life threatening, and Hogwarts had the hospital wing where Madame Pomfrey awaited to take care of any sicknesses or injuries. But those places were not hospitals, no true hospitals at any rate.

Funded sometime in the sixteen hundreds by Mungo Bonham, Saint Mungo's was the first of its kind in wizarding Britain. The first, and still the only.

Like all places within the magical community, it was hidden away from the prying eyes of those who could not use magic by powerful enchantments. To anyone looking, Saint Mungo's Hospital would appear to be nothing more than an abandoned, rundown department store called Purge and

Dowse, Ltd.

Harry Potter examined the entrance with a critical eye. His irises scanning over the dull red bricks that looked chipped and cracked in several places. He observed the sign naming the store, the lights no longer turned on and the sign was stained and dirty. No one who didn't know what this place was would have been able to find it.

Except for Harry and maybe a few others.

While his enhanced vision did not grant him the ability to see magic at work, his incredible sense of spatial awareness and sensitivity to magic allowed him to feel it. The magic here was very different than what he felt at King's Cross. Where that one felt like some kind of gateway, a link between one place and another, a portal, this one felt much less defined, less solid. If he had to guess, he would say that the hospital was being hidden by a well placed and powerful illusion.

Walking forward, his wizarding cloak fluttering behind him, Harry made his way over to the image of the rundown department store and stepped through the front window.

And in doing so, stepped into what looked like an entirely different world.

The place Harry now stood in was a reception area and waiting room. One half of the room was made of white tiles while the other half had an off white carpet. In the carpeted area were several comfortable looking armchairs and a few tables that had newspapers and magazines such as the Daily Profit and Teen Witch Weekly. A few people were sitting there, many with what looked like the most unusual problems Harry had ever seen.

Sitting nearest to the entrance was a very thin man with graying hair, a small nose and the largest pair of lips Harry had ever laid eyes on. For a moment, he almost thought they were naturally that large. It was only when spotting how puffy they were and the fact that they randomly changed color after every six second interval that he realized the man was suffering under some kind of illness or maybe some kind of curse. It looked like he ran afoul of a prank the Weasley twins might have cooked up.

There was another man sitting there with a little girl, his daughter presumably, who kept sneezing. Every time she sneezed something would happen; her hair would change color, her father's hair would change color, the carpet and seats would change color. There was even one time where the items near her had sprouted wings and start flying after a particularly loud sneeze.

At the end of the tiled side of the room was a reception desk marked 'Inquiries'. Sitting behind the desk was a middle aged witch with a slightly protuberant nose, black hair and eyes filing her nails.

It was the reception desk that Harry walked up to.

"Please state your name and reason for being here," the witch said without looking up from her nail filing. Harry raised an eyebrow, wondering whether he should be amused or appalled by the lack of professionalism this woman exuded.

He recovered quickly though, deciding that her lack of decorum wasn't important.

Besides, revenge was a dish best served cold. Or with blood. But since she was not a vampire, served cold would have to do.

"Harry Potter."

Watching the woman's head whip upwards quick enough that her neck emitted a loud crack was almost as amusing as watching her mouth drop and her eyes pop wide open when she saw his scar. Over in the waiting room, the other patience there had stopped what they were doing and stared too. Except for the little girl who was pointing him out to her father, still sneezing and making both her and his hair color change.

"And I am here for my twelve fifteen appointment with Emily Smith."

"Mister Potter," the witch breathed in shock. It took her a moment to remember what he said. When she did, the woman hastily placed the tip of her wand in a small microphone device and spoke into it. "Misses Smith? There is a Mister Harry Potter here to see you, ma'am."

There was a moment's pause before a familiar voice made itself known through the microphone, which seemed to also double as a speaker.

"Thank you. Tell him I will be down in a moment."

"I heard her," Harry said before the witch could speak. "I'll just grab a seat and wait."

"Of course, just relax Mister Potter," the witch was looking awfully flustered by his presence now. Such was the price of being a celebrity before he could properly pronounce the word. It was annoying, but it had its uses. "She will be down in just moment."

"Thank you."

"Also..." the woman trailed off, causing Harry to raise an eyebrow. When she flushed, his eye *almost* twitched." I just wanted to say it's a pleasure meeting you, Mister Potter. A real honor."

"The pleasures all mine," Harry gave her an incline of the head. Best not be rude. This was a public place. "Keep up the good work."

The woman preened under his words, almost causing him to shake his head. Instead he walked over to one of the seats in the waiting room and sat down. It really was quite comfortable. They must have put cushioning charms on them.

While he waited for Emily Smith to come down and meet with him, the little girl that kept on sneezing took this opportunity to move away from her father and over to him.

She was a cute little thing, with wide blue eyes and a small button nose. Her hair was currently blue.

"Are you really Harry Potter?" she asked with the inquisitive innocence only a child could pull off. She sneezed again and her hair turned pink.

Before Harry could answer, the girl's father came over and made to grab the girl.

"Miley, don't bother him now. Mister Potter is a very important person and too busy to deal with sick children." The man, an average looking fellow with graying hair, a goatee and gray eyes looked at him apologetically. "I am terribly sorry about her bothering you, sir."

"It's quite alright," Harry said, containing his amusement at being called sir by someone at least a decade older than him. His words just went to show how most people in the wizarding world really were nothing more than simple minded sheep.

He turned back to the little girl, deciding to humor her a bit. There was nothing wrong with a young child's curiosity after all.

"I am," he said, leaning over in his seat as if he were about to share some great secret with the girl. "Would you like to see my scar?"

"Can I?" the girl asked, excited. Harry looked over at the father, silently asking permission. The man looked grateful that he was humoring his daughter and gave a nod.

Lifting the fringe of his bangs, Harry showed the girl the lightning bolt shaped scar on his forehead that had made him so famous. She was suitably awed.

"Wow... you really are Harry Potter."

Harry's lips twitched.

"Yes, I really am Harry Potter."

"I know all about you, you know."

Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Do you?"

"Yes," Miley nodded her head once. "Mommy and Daddy have told me so many stories about you, and I have all of your books and Daddy reads them to me every night. My favorite is Harry Potter and the Twilight Princess."

As the girl began to ramble on about her favorite story featuring him, Harry just managed to contain his grimace. This was one of the reasons he did not approve of those books. Aside from the fact that they were making money off his name without a knut of it going to him, they were not just stories that contained inaccurate information about his life before Hogwarts.

People like this little girl actually believed they were true. Children and possibly even some adults really believed that he did all of those things. They were not just telling lies, but building up an image of him that did not match the real him. Those books were setting up expectations he could not meet, and Harry did not like that.

Plus, children like this girl were going to be awfully heartbroken when they finally learned the truth. There was nothing worse for a child than having your dreams destroyed. Harry knew that from experience.

"Heir Potter?"

Looking up, Harry found himself very thankful when he saw Emily Smith standing in the doorway that lead further into the hospital.

"Looks like it's time for my appointment so I'm afraid I must leave you." The girl looked awfully disappointed by this, but perked up when Harry ruffled her hair in an almost brotherly gesture. He would not be kissing babies any time soon, or ever, but that did not mean he wouldn't show kindness to a child. "You be good for your father, ok?"

As the girl promised she would be a good girl, Harry cast a wandless finite on her hair, changing it back to what he assumed was her normal honey streaked brown hair. He ignored the awed look her father cast him as he strode towards Emily Smith.

"You know, I should probably report you for using magic outside of school," Emily said, smiling as she led Harry through the door and into a long corridor filled with numbered doors that started at one hundred and moved up from there.

Emily Smith was a mildly attractive young woman. She wasn't very tall. Harry reached her shoulder. Her hair was long and dark, nearly as dark

as his own, and her eyes were a light blue. They were almond shaped and set on a lovely face with a small nose and full lips.

Harry's eyes flickered to those lips for a moment, before discreetly slipping down to her bustline.

He was unsure whether to be thankful or curse the fact that her breasts were hidden from view by the overly large Mediwizard robes.

"Harry?"

"Hmm?" Harry blinked, snapping back to reality. "Yes?"

"Are you alright?" Emily asked, her eyes staring into his. "You seem to be a bit distracted today."

"Yes," Harry took a deep breath, calming himself. Now was not the time to get distracted. "I am fine."

Emily did not look convinced, but decided not to inquire further.

She soon led him into a room that looked very similar to a normal doctors office in the muggle world. In fact, the only difference he could see was they had a cabinet full of potions instead of pills and there were several magical devices that whirred and croaked. Those definitely did not belong in a regular non magical hospital.

"Please take a seat, Harry," Emily used his first name and no title now that they were not in a public setting. Harry did as suggested while the young woman set about getting quills and parchment. "Now, to start, I want you to know that anything we find out and discuss here today will not leave this room. All Medi wizards take a magical oath to never betray their patient's confidence, so you do not need to worry about any... fans discovering your medical records or something of that nature."

"That's good to know." He actually hadn't thought of that, but now that she had mentioned it as a possibility, he couldn't help but shiver. The thought of rabid fans, or worse, one of those reporters for a magazine like Teen Witch Weekly, getting their hands on any personal files pertaining to him were not pleasant. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Emily sounded amused.

Walking over to where he was sitting, she set a piece of parchment down on the table a few feet to his left. Then she brought out a quill, which began hovering over the parchment after she released it. After that, she grabbed the wand she had set down on the counter and stood in front of him.

"Let's get started, shall we?" she said rhetorically. "I want you to just sit there. Try to remain as still as you can. Small movements can interfere with the magic, you see."

"Of course," Harry agreed and quickly set about relaxing his body so it would not be too tense while the young Mediwizard went about her task.

As Emily began swishing her wand about in complicated patterns, a large and complex series of runes began glowing on the examining table he was sitting on. A good deal of them Harry recognized as Nordic Runes, like Soliwo and Fehu. But there were others he did not recognize. They must have been a language he was not familiar with.

"These runes are designed to keep any external influences from befouling the results," Emily explained upon seeing his curious look. "As well as to keep your own magic from leaking out so that we can get a more accurate reading of your magical index."

"And what is a magical index?" asked Harry, now curious. This was not something he had heard of before.

"Magical index is the term associate with how large a witch or wizards magical reserves are based upon what is called the Merlin Power Scale. It's a very generalized way of cataloging the size of someone's magical core. The more magic you have, the larger your core is, metaphysically speaking at least, since a magical core is not something that can be physically measured."

"So essentially it tells you how strong a persons magic is?" Harry asked for clarification. This was interesting. He had always wondered how strong he was compared to others. He knew that his magic was stronger than most, even the seventh year students he had met did not seem as

strong as him, but he did not know just how strong he was beyond abstract concepts of power.

"Not really," Emily did not stop casting even as she spoke. A soft green glow soon covered Harry's body. The pen hovering over the parchment began writing. "It tells us how large your reserves of magic are by collecting and cataloging the excess magic that all witches and wizards release when they're magical core is 'full' for lack of a better term, but it does not give an accurate account of how powerful someone is. Power and the size of your magical reserves are two different things. Think of your reserves as the well from which you draw magic, and your power as the amount of magic you can pull from that well at any given time to cast a spell and you'll understand the difference."

"I see," Harry mused over her words. He did understand what she was talking about, it was a fairly simple analogy that did the task of conveying what she wanted very well. It also explained why these runes were here. "And that is what these runes are for, I take it? They are keeping my magic from going anywhere so you can get an accurate estimate of my reserves?"

"Yes, that's it exactly." Emily seemed pleased by the conclusion he came to. "When a witch or wizards magical core is full, they are always releasing a set amount of magic into the air based on how large their reserves are. The more magic you have, the more magic you release when full. This magic then dissipates into the atmosphere and becomes one with the world."

Which would explain to Harry why places like Hogwarts, Diagon Alley and Rue de la Magie felt so magical. All those witches and wizards wandering the area releasing magic that became one with the atmosphere around them was bound to leave a lasting impression.

Emily soon stopped casting as the spell became complete. The glow surrounding Harry brightened for a second, before dying down. At the same time, the quill stopped writing and moved off to the side where it lay down as if dead.

Picking up the parchment, Emily read through the information there, her

eyebrows getting higher and higher into her hairline the further she read. Harry watched, curious as to what it contained.

"Is there something wrong?"

Emily looked over at him, startled, before shaking her head.

"No, no, nothing's wrong," she assured him, smiling a bit shakily. When he raised an eyebrow she spoke again. "I'm serious, there is nothing wrong with you. In fact, you are in perfect shape."

"Then why are you so surprised?" asked Harry. He did not give her a chance to respond. It was a rhetorical question, and he already had a hunch. "I take it you are surprised by my magical index rating?"

"That is one thing, yes," Emily took a deep breath, as if preparing herself to say something she herself was having trouble believing. "Checking someone's magical index is an important procedure that must be repeated yearly because a witch or wizards magical reserves grow yearly as they use more magic. Or they should. It's important to note how quickly or slowly their reserves grow because if their magic is not growing properly, it may lead to their magic stagnating or could be a sign that their magic has been tainted or poisoned."

Harry remained dutifully silent. He knew that she was going somewhere with this, and that whatever she was about to tell him needed context for him to truly understand the significance of what she was saying. Plus, he would not like it if someone interrupted him when he was giving someone important information.

"I have been doing these yearly check ups for many years, Harry, for both young children and adults." She took a deep breath. She was about to drop the bomb shell. "In all my years, I have never seen a magical index this high from someone so young. Even most adult witches and wizards do not have an index as high as yours."

"I see." Then it was as he suspected. "Would it be possible to know what my magical index is? Also, is it possible for you to tell me what the average magical index is for context purposes?"

"Yes, I believe that's doable," Emily nodded after some thought. "So long as I do not give away someone's actual information, I should be able to tell you what the average index ratings are."

"To start, your magical index is 56,301."

"That's divisible by seven."

"It is at that," Emily nodded. Seven was a very powerful magical number, along with three and thirteen it made one of the most powerful numbers when enacting magic rituals or casting spells.

Harry wondered if there was any significance with that in regards to his magical index.

"That is the size of an above average adult witch or wizard, which can range from 40,000 to 75,000. Average witches and wizards have an index of about 30,000 and usually fluctuate between around that level, but never really get any higher. The really powerful witches and wizards have a magical index rating that can go above 90,000, though such power is very rare, nearly unheard of. Most children your age only have an index ranging from 10,000 to 15,000, with the more powerful children ranging anywhere from 16,000 to 25,000 thousand."

Harry gave a noncommittal nod as he committed the numbers to memory. He assumed the above 90,000 range was where wizards like Dumbledore and Voldemort were located on the Merlin Power Scale. They were really the only ones who could possibly have reserves that large.

It looked like he had a long way to go before reaching their level, but he was still very pleased to hear he was around the level of an above average adult wizard, even if he was on the lower end of the totem poll.

"Emily?"

"I believe that is the first time you've called me by my first name."

Harry opened his mouth, then closed it. She was right. In fact, it was the first time he had called anyone older than him by their first name.

How strange.

"So it is," he would deal with whatever that meant later. There were more important things to worry about. "I was wondering, since my magical index is so high, do you think it could effect me in anyway?"

"You mean like adverse side effects?" she asked, her brow furrowing in thought.

"Not necessarily," Harry corrected, "I mean in general. You know how children at a young age have bouts of accidental magic that can affect the environment or people around them like changing their hair color or making objects float?"

"Yes." Emily looked curious. She was obviously wondering where he was going with this.

"Well, what if my magic is so strong that it has actually affected my body? You said that I am in excellent physical condition, yes?"

"I did," Emily brought the parchment back up to her face again and reread what was on it. "Aside from getting a read on your magical index, I also checked your body for any symptoms of possible magical viruses. They can affect any part of the body so Medi wizards must get a clear medical scan of all your bodies systems; the nervous system, the circulatory system, the respiratory system, musculature and skeletal systems. Every possible area of your body is given a thorough scan to ensure there are no irregularities that may be caused by a magical disease or dark curses."

Harry nodded. Magical diseases were quite deadly. The Dragon Pox epidemic that had swept through the magical world in the twentieth century was proof of that. Even though there was a cure, several witches and wizards had still died before treatments could be administered.

"The only place where I can detect any kind of taint is the scar on your forehead. Unfortunately, I am unsure if my readings on your scar mean anything. No one else has ever survived the killing curse so I have no context to base my findings off of."

Harry raised an eyebrow. He was aware of the taint, but did not know anything beyond the fact that it was there. Perhaps she could tell him more.

"And what did you find out?"

"Only that there is dark magic lingering around the scar," Emily replied. "I am somewhat surprised that there is still so much dark magic around it, but it's as I said, for all I know this could be natural for someone who survived the killing curse to have. Curses like that are certainly powerful enough to leave lasting impressions."

"So there's nothing wrong with it?"

"You mean aside from the fact that it's leaking dark magic like a sieve?" she asked rhetorically. "No, nothing that I can detect at any rate. It is more than likely just the lingering taint from powerful dark magic."

Harry sighed. It looked like she knew nothing about his scar either. He wondered if there was anyone who could determine whether or not the taint in his scar was harmful?

"Is it possible that my magic is boosting my physical attributes?" asked Harry, getting to the crux of why he scheduled this appointment. "Like, say my magic affecting my muscular system. I have always been very active, and exercise a lot, so perhaps my magic has been enhancing the effects of my exercise routine, making my muscles stronger than they would be otherwise."

"That... that could be possible," Emily had a thoughtful look on her face. "Most times when a child does accidental magic it's usually a case of the child experiencing a high level of emotions, often negative emotions, and is generally a form of self-defense. Sort of like an autonomic reaction, the magic responds to their emotions without the will of the child."

She looked over at Harry, her eyes alight. It was clear she was getting excited by where her thoughts were leading her.

"But your magical index is so high, and likely has been above average for your entire life that the leakage has literally been enhancing your body to

beyond human levels." She paused. "Tell me, when was the first case of accidental magic that you remember?"

Wow. That was a loaded question. His first case of accidental magic was when he was about two months old, when he accidentally levitated his mother's favorite vase because it was shiny and dropped it. Not something he was willing to share with this woman as it would cause too many questions to be asked.

"I don't know," Harry shrugged and decided to go with a half truth. "I've had strange things happen to me for as long as I can remember. I've transfigured objects that were thrown at me, I caused a lot of objects to vanish or float, I turned my grade teacher's hair blue once when he insulted me." Harry paused before deciding to drop a bomb on the woman. "I do specifically remember one incident when I was five where my cousin was chasing me and I apparated onto the roof of my relatives house."

"Accidental apparition," Emily whispered excitedly. "And at five no less." She nodded to herself. "Yes, yes, it is very possible that your magic is simply so strong that it actually acts as an enhancer to your body. I've noticed on your scans that all of the systems in your body are working at peak performance. Your lungs can intake more oxygen than most humans and are extremely durable, likewise your circulatory system seems to pump blood through your body much more efficiently than any other system I have ever seen and you produce more blood vessels than anyone else I know. Both your muscles and bones are incredibly dense, incredibly strong."

She gave him another look, this one calculating.

"If it were not for my scans, I would assumed you were not human because of how strong your body is. Of course, that just proves this theory. Your scans state that you are one hundred percent human. Not an ounce of creature's blood in you, which can only mean that you are right and that your magic is actually enhancing and strengthening your body beyond what should be possible for a boy your age."

The woman was practically quivering with excitement.

"This... this could change everything," she whispered. "Everything we know about magic and the body can be tossed on it's head. This could easily revolutionize the way we see magic!"

"I would like to ask that you refrain from mentioning any of what we've discussed here, or writing about it," he added. At her disappointed look, Harry decided to toss her a bit of a bone. "At least not yet." She looked up at him. "I have actually long suspected that my magic was responsible for the way my body turned out, but until now have never been able to prove it. If you would like, I was planning on writing a book about magic and it's affects on the human body and I was thinking about possibly asking you to sign on as a co-author."

He had a two-fold reason for doing this. First, any book he wrote right now may not be taken seriously. Even though he was Harry Potter, Heir Apparent to the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter and the Boy-Who-Lived, he was still only twelve. By having Emily Smith, a well known and widely acknowledged Mediwizard who knows more about magics affects on the body than most, help write his book he was ensuring that it had credibility to go with his fame. Because if someone like Emily Smith was helping to write it, then it must be true.

The second reason was much simpler. By allowing Emily to write this book with him, he was making her work famous through him, meaning she would be very grateful to him and would be more willing to help him with something should he need it. It would be a good idea to have someone in Saint Mungo's who owed him a favor.

"You would ask me to help you write a book about this?" Emily sounded surprised, shocked even.

"Of course," Harry smiled. "Ever since we spoke at the New Year Gala, I have been thinking about coming here for this very reason. I have not had the chance to speak with you until now, and did not want to ask you this through something so impersonal as a letter." He looked at the young woman and saw her eager expression. "Would you like to take part in this with me as a co-author?"

Hook, line and sinker.

"I would love to!" Emily burst out. She blushed a bit when she realized she had actually squealed, but quickly regained her composure.

"Excellent!" Harry said, matching her excitement. "In that case, I'll send along all my notes on what I have discovered so far and all the theories and hypothesis I've come up with. It will take a little while to get them in order, but they should be sent to you before it's time for me to go to Hogwarts. Read them over, write some revisions and let me know what you think. If possible, I would like to have this book published in two years."

"Two years?" Emily frowned. "That's awfully ambitious, Harry. This is some serious theoretical work we're getting into. Not to mention we're entering undiscovered territory here. I think this will take a lot more than just two years. Maybe even around a decade."

Harry's lips turned downward. He had been hoping to get this book out before graduating. It would have looked good on his resume.

"I guess we'll just have to see how well we can do," he responded diplomatically. "We won't rush this. I want our work to be accurate, but I do hope it will not take as long as a decade."

"Of course," Emily smiled. "You're an ambitious young man. We'll see what can be done to speed this along without rushing our research." She looked over at the clock on the wall. "Speaking of rushing, it looks like it's time for you to go. I'm already running fifteen minutes late to my next appointment."

"Alright," Harry stood up. "I'll see you later. It was a pleasure speaking with you, as always."

"Bye, Harry. Nice talking to you to."

Emily saw Harry out the door, and the young Potter heir began making his way out of Saint Mungo's Hospital.

As he left and walked into a secluded alley where he would apparate back home, only one thought was on his mind, and it was not about the book he would be writing with Emily Smith.

Puberty. He couldn't believe it. He was going through puberty. To be more specific, he was already in the middle phase of puberty when male's started having erotic dreams that according to the medical books he had read were known as wet dreams and often woke up with an erection known as morning wood.

Harry had always known it would eventually happen. Most males start going through puberty around the ages of eleven or twelve. He had actually started a bit earlier than most, ten, but the only difference was that he had begun releasing Gonadotropin-releasing hormone, or GnRH, earlier than normal. The last thing he had expected was to start waking up with a pitch tent in boxers and a mess in his sheets!

That particular phase should not have started until he was at least thirteen!

What's worse was that the reason he was beginning so early was because of his magic! His own magic!

Harry had always been very pleased with how his physical form was shaped. He was taller than almost all of the other boys his age, his facial structure was just a little more mature and possessing of less baby fat. Most people often mistook him for someone a year or two older than he really was. And he liked that.

Even better was how good of shape he was in. While Harry would not consider himself vain by any means of the word, he had always been pleased at how well formed his muscles were. There were boys who were already reaching the end of their teenage years that did not have a body as well formed as his was. While his muscles were not like those of a body builder, they were well built enough that people could actually see the beginning forms of muscle definition on them. He even had a six pack that was starting to take shape.

Now though... now he was beginning to regret how his magic had been helping build his body. It was clear to him that in order to help his muscle growth along, his magic had been releasing various chemicals into his body, including testosterone, the principle sex hormone that not only helped build muscle mass, but also increased a male's sex drive. As

much as Harry had enjoyed the benefits of having a body that was fit and looked older than his physical age, he was not sure he was ready to experience all of the issues that came with such a chemical being produced within him in mass quantities.

Namely, he was not ready to experience the issue known as girls.

As Harry Potter apparated back to his relatives house, leaving the alley with a near silent displacement of air, only one thought crossed his mind.

He was so screwed.

XoX

Sometimes when Harry was feeling stressed out from whatever was ailing him, he would go out into the garden and tend to the plants. While he was no Neville Longbottom, he was good enough with non magical flowers that his garden had grown rather well. Helping heal the plants using his magic and digging around in the dirt to soften the soil usually helped sooth his troubled mind when his meditations failed him. He called it physical meditation.

Yet not even working in the garden could help sooth him now.

After his appointment at Saint Mungo's, Harry had met up with Lisa as always. Just because he had come to the startling realization that his puberty had started a year earlier than it should have did not mean he was going to start ignoring his best friend. However, in meeting up with the girl he had known and thought of as a little sister for years Harry had discovered something that in a single instant changed how he thought of his best friend for going on six years now.

Lisa had breasts. True, they were not very large, mere lumps on her chest no larger than a pair of Clementine oranges (small seedless oranges that are no bigger than a few centimeters in diameter and are often called cuties), but they were there. His friend had been wearing a sleeveless, skin tight shirt today, and he had been able to see she was beginning to develop in the bust. She had even begun to wear a bra!

Of course, him noticing this may have had something to do with the fact

that the first place he looked after her face was her chest, but that just compounded onto his problem.

Lisa was like a sister to him. Ever since he had developed feelings for the girl, they had been nothing but the love a brother would have for his sister. Or so he thought at least. Since he had never had a sister, he couldn't say for sure if that was what he was feeling. But Harry imagined that if he did have a sister, that was what it would feel like.

Now he just felt sick. The mere fact that he had been looking at the person he had for years believed was like a sister to him in a way that was anything but brotherly repulsed him. He didn't even want to imagine what Lisa would think if she ever found out he had actually been checking her out. Harry doubted such an occurrence would be pleasant.

A sigh escaped his lips as he realized that not even gardening was going to help him. What he needed was some good old fashion exercise. Maybe if he ran himself into the ground his head would clear.

Then again, maybe not. It was hard to say.

"Such a long sigh," a hissing voice reached his ears, causing Harry to perk up. He looked down to see a decently sized garter snake by his feet. It was a long black snake with white scales running along its back. Its yellow eyes were fixed on him. *"Something on your mind, amigo."*

"Just dealing with some new problems, Gerard."

"Anything I can do to help?"

"Not unless you can tell me how to reduce the amount of testosterone in my body," Harry hissed dryly.

"I don't even know what that is..."

"I know."

Harry spent a few more minutes talking to Gerard, who he had named himself after finding the small snake in his garden. He and Gerard had worked out a deal; Harry would let him stay in his garden, provided he

was careful not to get caught by Petunia and the other members of his 'family' and took care of any rabbits that tried eating his flowers.

It went without saying that Gerard agreed to his terms. It helped that the snake found speaking with a human to be interesting.

After a while, Harry decided to head back inside. It was getting late, but maybe he could get in a good work out that would tire him out enough that he would not have any erotic dreams tonight.

Opening the door to his room and entering, Harry realized that he would not be getting any exercise this night. The reason being that there was someone already in his room. A house elf, to be exact.

Though, saying the creature before him was a house elf did not really do the being before him any justice, or perhaps it would be more accurate to call it injustice. This particular one had to be the strangest elf he had ever seen bar none.

Like all house elves it still had the disproportionately large head, the spindly arms and legs, the pointed nose and the floppy bat ears. It was also wearing a tea towel like most house elves, but that was where the similarities ended.

For one thing, the tea towel it was wearing had seen better days. Much better days. It looked like it had not been washed since the elf had begun to wear it. Both the front and back were stained with numerous black marks that looked like ink and food, and Harry even saw red stains that looked suspiciously like blood.

No self respecting house elf would ever wear such a dirty tea towel.

Another thing Harry noticed were it's scars. Lining the creature's tiny arms and legs were numerous scars that looked to have been made with a whip of some kind. A few even looked magical in nature. He recognized the cutting curse.

What did this mean? Were his owners abusive? Or were these scars some kind of punishment? Harry could not see all of them being used for punishment. The House elf would have been sold off or freed long before

it committed enough horrible acts to be branded with so many scars. Which left abusive owners.

That just left one more question. Well, a few actually, but one that he really wanted to know.

"Harry Potter!" the house elf squeaked in a high pitched voice. Harry absently cast a silencing charm around his room so no one would hear this conversation. He didn't need his relatives freaking out. "So long has Dobby wanted to meet you, sir, but you have been difficult to get alone... such an honor it is..."

"Honors all mine," Harry said as made a small gesture with his hand. A soft, almost unnoticeable squelching sound came from the door behind him as it locked.

He turned his attention back to Dobby, determined to get the answer to the question he wanted.

What was this house elf doing in his bedroom?

Oh... wow... seriously, you guys... I don't even know what to say. 275 reviews. That's incredible. I feel really strange, like, all munya-munya and hawawa (cyber cookie to those who get that reference). I love you guys.

I also feel a bit guilty. When I wondered why I didn't get that many reviews for chapter 6, it was more out of curiosity because my other 5 chapters had received so many more reviews. In comparison, chapter 6 received less than half of what I usually got. It was weird. I didn't, you know, want you guys to feel you HAD to leave a review. I mean, don't get me wrong. I love receiving them, I just don't want you to feel forced or anything.

Of course, if you do want to leave a review, please do so. I will be grateful to all the people who are kind enough to let me know how I'm doing. Also, don't think I need to mention it, but be sure to check out my blog: Thoughts and Wonderings of a Fanfiction Writer. The link is on my profile.

Shopping Disaster

Chapter 9: Shopping Disaster

Harry managed to just barely maintain his poise as Andromeda Tonks continued straightening out his newest dress robes and just in general fussing over him as she made sure his attire looked perfect. She had told him that it was so he could look the part of a pureblood heir to an Ancient and Most Noble House. Harry thought she was just fussing over him so she could use the opportunity to mother him, that seemed to be what most of the older women he knew did.

As annoying as her mothering was, the next few minutes would be incredibly important, and he did not want to bungle this meeting because of something as simple as him not looking the part.

"I have no clue where you got these dress robes, Harry, but they are some of the most beautiful robes I have ever seen," Andromeda was saying as she smoothed out a small wrinkle in his collar. Harry almost absently ran his hands over the soft and comfortable fabric of his robes.

The dress robes he was wearing were one of the pairs Perennelle had bought him in France. They were a dark green in color that almost bordered on the black, but would lighten up whenever the light hit it at a certain angle, making it look like his robes had shimmering lights on them. On the front right breast was the Potter family's coat of arms and motto stitched into the fabric in incredible detail. Harry could understand why Andromeda was so impressed by his robes, they were made to impress.

They had also cost a small fortune.

"Imported from France," Harry said absently as Andromeda finally took a step back and studied his outfit and posture. Technically, he wasn't lying.

"From France, you say?" Andromeda murmured as she eyed the clothing with a speculative gleam. "I can definitely see that. The French have

always had a flair for clothing we English just don't possess. Now," she adopted a more business-like tone as opposed to the casual one she had been using. Harry straightened. "You remember what I told you when dealing with Nathaniel Greengrass?"

"Be exceedingly polite, only make small talk about issues regarding open policies within the ICW, and do not state any opinions unless asked," Harry recited dutifully. "You needn't worry. This meeting is too important for me to jeopardize by doing or saying something foolish."

"Of course," Andromeda smiled, her eyes glinting a bit. "This meeting will determine whether or not Nathaniel will allow your girlfriend to be seen in public with you anymore."

Harry felt a very small blush creeping up on his cheeks. It was, in all honesty, impressive that his face only had a small blush instead of a larger one like he would have had several weeks ago for someone suggesting anything remotely similar to him being intimate with one of his friends. Or anyone else for that matter.

He would have to thank Selene the next time he saw her.

Scowling a bit, he did his best to remain calm. It would not do for his body to react like a normal teenage male just before he was to meet with the father of one of his friends, especially this particular friend.

Even though Nathaniel Greengrass was not what anyone with a sane mind would call a protective father (sane people would call him the opposite), he *was* someone who would not let his daughter be seen with a person he did not believe he could benefit from allying with.

That was why this meeting was so important. It would determine whether or not Nathaniel Greengrass would allow him to see Daphne anymore. That man was not like other witches and wizards he had met during the New Year Gala, sheep who went with everything he said because he was The-Boy-Who-Lived and the Heir to one of the Founding Five Houses or humored him because they felt they could take advantage of him due to his age and relative inexperience.

Those people were fools. Easy to manipulate and use if you knew how to

play to their greed. It was even easier for him because so many underestimated him due to his age. They felt that because he was a child, they had nothing to fear from him.

Nathaniel Greengrass was no fool. He would not fall in line due to his fame, nor would he underestimate Harry because of his young age or lack of true political experience. If Harry wanted to get Head of the House of Greengrass on his side, or at least convince the man to allow Daphne to be seen with him, he would need to tread very carefully and show that allying with him would bring about more benefits than it would to not ally with him.

"She's not my girlfriend," Harry muttered a tad more harshly than he had intended. Andromeda giggled at him.

"Of course not," she amended, still smiling with that mischievous twinkle in her eyes. It reminded Harry a lot of the look Sirius Black had the few times the man had visited before he and his parents went into hiding.

"She's just a friend who you happen to find extremely attractive."

"Yes, exactly," Harry nodded his head, "she's just a — wait, no!"

Harry's scowl grew as did the red flush on his cheeks when his mind caught up to what he was saying. He couldn't believe he had fallen for such a simple trick.

"I do not find her attractive — I mean yes I find her attractive," he said, then quickly added. "But it's not like that! Her physical attractiveness is something I only recognize from an objective stand point."

Andromeda raised an eyebrow.

"An objective standpoint?"

"Yes," Harry nodded his head, "an objective standpoint."

"So, you are telling me that you're not attracted to her?"

Harry gave a stiff nod.

"That is exactly what I'm telling you."

"I sense a liar," Andromeda said in a slightly sing song voice. Harry quickly looked away from the woman, unable to look her in the eyes. He could feel his cheeks heating up again.

"You're really not helping me prepare for this meeting with the way you're talking, you know," Harry mumbled a tad petulantly.

"Sorry," Andromeda apologized, though from the smile on her face and the tone of her voice, he did not think she was being very sincere. "I'm just trying to get you to relax. You don't want your posture to be too tense, it will betray your anxiousness to him. Nathaniel is a master at reading emotions, and he will find out that you are nervous if you do not relax. Remember, you want to come at him as a confident heir to a powerful pureblood family, not a child worried for his friend."

Harry did not know how her teasing him about his attraction to Daphne would help him relax. If anything, it made him more tense. Still, he wasn't going to say anything, if only because he just didn't want to bother getting into a pointless argument over something so inconsequential as to whether her teasing was helping him or not.

"Right," Harry also ignored the child comment as best he could as he closed his eyes and practiced taking in a few deep breaths. It was unfortunate that keeping his mind clear on a constant basis was a near impossible task. Keeping his composure would have been much easier otherwise.

Perhaps as he advanced in Occlumency he would be capable of constantly keeping his mind clear of distractions, but for now, he would simply have to make due with what skills in the art he had.

"It looks like it's time for you to leave," Andromeda said as she glanced at a small watch on her wrist.

She knelt down, placing both hands on his shoulders and looked at him intently.

"Remember what I have told you and you'll do fine."

"Don't worry," Harry made sure to give her a look only someone with the utmost confidence in themselves could possess. It would not do to let anyone see how nervous he was. "I'm not about to let my friend down now."

"Good."

Leaning forward, the beautiful former member of the Black family placed a small kiss on his forehead. She, quite thankfully, was not wearing lip stick. Harry had no desire to clean it off when he was on a tight schedule.

"Good luck, Harry," Andromeda said to him as she held out a small pot filled with floo powder for him to take.

"Thank you," as Harry grabbed a handful of floo powder, he knew that he would need more than luck to win over Nathaniel Greengrass. He could only hope his intelligence, fame and cunning would see him through this meeting. His friend was counting on him.

XoX

Harry almost broke character and gave a sigh of relief when he managed to come out of the floo network without a single hitch; no shooting out like a muggle canon ball, no missile Harry, nothing. It was the first time since using that particular method of travel that he did not get himself shot out like those kamikaze fighters from Japan that had attacked the Americans in world war two.

He was going to have to find some way to thank Emily Smith for her help. Had she not told him about how he was constantly leaking more magic than his body was able to use, he would have never found a solution to his problem with the floo method of travel.

Stabilizing charms, used by mothers on various objects like baby walkers to help keep their children from tipping over when they got carried away or had spikes in accidental magic. They were a rather ingenious spell that kept an objects equilibrium in balance at all times, ensuring they would not tip over from anything less than a purposeful act.

The spell hadn't even needed much modification to work on a human,

just a small added equation to configure the spell for organic material, his height, body weight and magical resistance. It had been a surprisingly easy equation to make, though that might have been due to him getting some help from Andromeda when it came to creating the arithmetic equation.

Taking a look at his surroundings, Harry noted that he was in some kind of lobby. The room was decorated in dark red woods and possessed black marble tiling as well as large, marble Corinthian columns embedded into the walls. It had an air of refined elegance about it without being too ostentatious. Harry assumed the place was designed that way to appear humble while impressing those who came through with its imposing columns.

A small crack alerted Harry to the fact that he was no longer alone. A small house elf had appeared in front of him, this one much more pleasantly dressed than the last house elf he had met.

"Harry Potter?" the house elf asked in a refined voice, nothing at all like some of the other members of its race that he had spoken with on occasion.

"Yes."

"Master Greengrass is waiting for you in his study. Follow me please."

Without waiting for a response, the house elf turned and began walking out of the room. Harry quickly followed as he was led into a hallway with dark green carpeting that looked almost like grass and brown wooden walls that gave the space a more natural feel to it.

Knowing he would not get many chances once the meeting took place, Harry used this opportunity to clear his mind. He went through all of the Occlumency meditations he could think of, and even ran the gauntlet for meditation techniques Master Wei had taught him. They helped, if only a little.

Harry was soon led into a large, open room with many doors and a large set of stairs, the grand foyer. Like the lobby, the floor was made of black marble, while the columns that looked like they were being used

more for decoration than support were made from white marble. In the center of the room was a beautifully crafted fountain of what Harry recognized from his studies in mythology as a Wood Nymph spouting water from a vase in it's hands. Several meters from the fountain was a large staircase that split into a T junction at the end, leading in two opposing directions.

The room itself was very large, imposing. At a guess, Harry would have to say it was around two stories tall. The white columns against the black marble background made the room look even more intimidating and majestic than it otherwise would have been.

The house elf, whose name Harry had never learned, led him up the staircase. They took a left at the T, leading to more steps that ended in another hallway. The walk through this one was much shorter, and soon Harry found himself standing in front of a elegantly crafted wooden door with a crest of a large King Cobra standing on a grassy plain with it's hood fully extended, the Greengrass family crest.

Below the crest was the family motto: '*Anguis in herba*' or 'A snake in the grass'. It was a very apt motto for a family whose name was not only Greengrass, but which had belonged to the Slytherin House since the family's founding.

The house elf knocked on the door.

"Master, Heir Potter has arrived."

There was a moment of silence.

"Send him in."

Opening the door, the house elf bowed before Harry and gestured him inside.

"The master will see you now."

This was it. The moment he had been preparing for since sending Nathaniel Greengrass his letter asking for Daphne to accompany him alongside his other friends as they shopped for school supplies. Harry

took a calming breath, preparing for the inevitable meeting with the only man he had met so far aside from Voldemort who scared him.

He entered the room.

Nathaniel Greengrass' study was much different than any of the other rooms he had been in so far. It still retained its intimidating majesty, but it was also very spartan. Aside from a shelf lined with scrolls and books to his left and the large desk with the bare backed chair in front there was nothing in this room the speak of.

Harry squared his shoulders as he walked forward with the practiced grace that Andromeda had drilled into him when he asked for her advice on pureblood affairs the first time they had met. He was grateful for his animagus form as well, as it made his already impressive gait even more graceful than usual.

He stopped just a few feet from the desk, which Nathaniel Greengrass was sitting behind, several documents that he appeared to have been writing in sitting in two neat piles on his desk.

"Heir Potter," the voice was just as dead and emotionless as he remembered it. Harry did his best not to let the chills that wanted to run down his spine at that voice come out.

"Lord Greengrass," Harry inclined his waist slightly in a respectful bow, just as Andromeda had told him to do. "I hope you have had a pleasant summer. I hear the ICW has brought forward several progressive laws they are hoping to pass."

"They are," was the only thing Nathaniel allowed himself to say as he gestured for Harry to take the seat in front of the desk.

Almost as soon as the young Potter heir did so, a feeling of dread welled up inside of him. The Head to the House of Greengrass suddenly seemed much more imposing then before. It was only thanks to his acute senses that he managed to figure out what was happening to him.

Magic. The chair had been charmed to somehow increase the negative emotions a person was experiencing. Or perhaps it would be more

accurate to say that it increased ones perception of dread that many people likely felt when in the Lord Greengrass' presence. Harry suspected Nathaniel Greengrass used this as a means to judge others and take advantage of their distracted state when they were doing business.

Harry stilled his mind and pushed back. He would not allow himself to be beaten by such a simple trick when there was so much on the line.

"Tell me, Heir Potter," Nathaniel did not look up from his work. "Why should I let my daughter go with you for her school supplies? Why should I let her spend any time with you at all?"

This man certainly did not beat around the bush. Harry was very glad he had spoken with Andromeda before hand and knew the man would do this, otherwise he may have made an attempt at small talk and destroyed any hopes he had of helping his friend gain some freedom.

"Because while the Ancient and Most Noble House Potter has been reduced to a single member, the name still carries much weight, both within the wizengamot and magical Britain as a whole," Harry did not hesitate to answer. "There is also the fact that The-Boy-Who-Lived is an international icon, known not just in Great Britain but all of Europe for the defeat of the Dark Lord who went by the title Lord Voldemort when he was but a year old. To not allow your daughter to accompany me could stain your reputation for the light families who will see this as an insult to me, as well as the darker families who are wondering why you are not taking advantage of your daughter's friendship with me."

Harry was not surprised when Nathaniel Greengrass did not even so much as flinch at the mention the Dark Lord's name. Not even a facial twitch. The man truly was as dead as people said.

"Even if an alliance between our two houses is not beneficial to you right now, given some of the families you are currently doing business with, it is never a good idea to burn down any bridges in this day and age."

This was the speech he and Andromeda had prepared for this moment. Ever since Harry had received a reply to his letter, asking for his presence at Greengrass Manor, the two of them had been working on a

speech that would convince Nathaniel Greengrass to, if not ally himself with Harry, than at least leave the door open.

"Alliances in this day and age are never set in stone. Betrayal and backstabbing by people you are allied with who have their own political agenda and desires that run counterproductive to yours is not uncommon. Most battles are fought not with wands anymore, but with words and a combination of blackmail, favors and strong arm political maneuvers. But I am sure you already know that well, my Lord."

"I do," Nathaniel finally set down the quill he had been using to write with aside. He looked up into Harry's eyes, and as those dead blue irises met his own, the young heir to the Potter fortune just barely managed to contain his shudder. "Tell me then, what is to stop you from betraying me if I allow this? What's to say your entire reason for getting close to Daphne is not to use me and betray me at the last second."

This, right here, was why Harry had to tread very carefully with the Head of the Greengrass family. Anyone else would have never given a thought to this, never suspected that a child, even one as well learned and intelligent as Harry obviously was, could possibly think up the idea of getting close to a political adversary and stabbing them in the back later. This man would. He would not underestimate Harry because of something as simple and redundant as his age.

"Daphne," Harry answered immediately. It was only one word, but he knew that someone like Nathaniel Greengrass would understand the implications of what that single word, a name, meant.

"You care for her," it sounded almost like an inquiry, but Harry knew it was not.

"I do," there was no point in lying. Lord Greengrass would detect a lie the moment it issued from Harry's mouth.

"And yet you have not offered a bride price for her," Nathaniel countered, just like Andromeda knew he would. To him, Daphne was nothing more than a bargaining tool to be used and sold off in order to help his house ascend to new heights and grow in power.

"Because we have not gotten to that point in our relationship," Harry answered. Now came the most important part of this entire discussion. "Daphne is someone whom I have only come to know within the last nine months. I would like to think we have already established a connection, but our relationship remains rocky at best. And before deciding on marriage, I would like to discover whether or not the two of us would work."

And there it was, a very small opening. Harry was leaving himself deliberately vulnerable, allowing Nathaniel Greengrass an opening to make a bid at seizing control over The-Boy-Who-Lived along with the fortune of the Potter family by utilizing Daphne's growing relationship with him. It was a large enough opening that there was no way the Head of the House of Greengrass could not recognize it for what it was, but small enough that Harry's words would sound more like an accidental slip of the tongue than because of any sort of childish naivety or purposeful maneuvering.

Now all that was left was to see if the Lord Greengrass would take the bait.

For several long seconds, nothing was said. No noise came from within the study except for the soft breathing of Harry and the man before him. Even then, the noise sounded incredibly harsh to Harry's enhanced sense of hearing.

Harry could feel his heart thumping a painful beat in his chest as the silence dragged on. He tried not to let it show, but as this disquieting silence continued, his nervousness began to increase.

Perhaps it had not been a good idea to use this particular line. Andromeda had warned him that Nathaniel Greengrass was not the kind of person to underestimate him for any reason. Maybe it would have been better if they had thought up another avenue of attack.

"Very well," Nathaniel Greengrass spoke out at last. "As it is already known that you and Daphne are closely acquainted, I will allow this relationship to continue." Harry almost twitched at the word 'relationship'. The way he had spoken it almost made it seem like he and Daphne were

dating.

Which was preposterous of course. Sure, Daphne was the most beautiful girl he knew that was his age, and they were very close. In fact, thinking on it, he was probably closer to Daphne than he was any of his other friends at Hogwarts.

But dating? Harry might be going through puberty, but he wasn't sure he was ready to even think about dating. There were still far too many things for him to accomplish before he thought about having romantic relations with someone.

"Thank you, my Lord Greengrass," Harry did not let any of thoughts on the matter of relationships and romance be known as he inclined his head respectfully.

If Nathaniel Greengrass saw his gesture, he did not show it.

"Alfred."

A soft crack and the house elf that had first directed Harry to this room appeared.

"Yes, My Lord?"

"Get Daphne and bring her here."

"At once, My Lord."

The house elf, Alfred, disappeared with another soft crack, leaving Harry alone with the Head of the Greengrass family.

It was a most uncomfortable silence. Several times, Harry had actually thought about making conversation, if only to keep the silence from going on, but each time he thought about doing so, he shut the idea down immediately after wards.

He felt like a coward. It had been so easy to talk with this man before, during the New Year Gala he had spoken with Nathaniel Greengrass at length and not been bothered at all. But here, in Lord Greengrass' own

Manor, the imposing and dead looking family head was a truly frightful figure to behold.

Which may be why Harry was feeling so tense. The New Year Gala had been a public setting. There was a certain amount of politeness that was expected from people when they were in public, especially during such a formal event like a ball. Even if he had wanted to, Nathaniel was forced to remain polite and conversational towards Harry lest people scorn and slander his reputation for being rude to The-Boy-Who-Lived.

Still, even knowing *why* Harry was feeling much more nervous now did not change how ashamed he was to feel that way at all. How could he prove himself as the strongest wizard to have ever existed if he was afraid of a single man?

Harry supposed he should just be glad that his carefully constructed facade had not broken already. He was using every Occlumency technique he knew to discreetly keep his mind clear of all thoughts. It was working so far, but Harry did not delude himself into thinking he would last forever. If that house elf did not hurry up soon, Harry feared he might actually crack.

A knock came at the door. Harry only just managed to keep himself from revealing how relieved he was.

"My Lord, your daughters are here."

The frown that appeared on Nathaniel Greengrass' face did not bode well for anyone.

"Send them in."

Harry did not turn around as he heard the door open, knowing that doing so would have been a breach in decorum. Nor did he look when he heard a gasp come from behind him despite his curiosity.

He did, however, take notice when none other than Daphne Greengrass walked into his line of sight. Even though his face revealed nothing, her appearance left him stunned and breathless. Was it just him, or did she look even more stunning than the last time he saw her?

Her honey blond hair was the same as it always was, gently flowing down her head and shoulders in waves and framing a face of aristocratic perfection with higher than average cheekbones that retained their softness, ensuring that the harsher angles and shadows often found on women with a profile like hers were nonexistent. Her blue eyes were the same as always, chips of crystalline ice to everyone except those who knew her. Set in between them was a small, slightly upturned nose that held a gentle curve that made it her lovely features all the more attractive.

And below that were her lips. Slightly pink, moist looking cupid bow lips. What Harry wouldn't give to claim those lips with his own and...

Harry blinked, then took a calming breath. He pictured an image of a vast mountain range within his head and a never ending blue sky. The erection that had been threatening to make itself known stopped and soon began to deflate.

It was pleasing to feel his arousal going down before it could truly become an issue. The last thing he needed was to become visibly aroused by the sight of his friend. Not only would it likely ruin his chances of giving Daphne more freedom, it would also be incredibly humiliating to be seen like that by three people, one of whom frightened him, another who was his best magical friend, and the last who he did not know at all.

With his body still feeling quite warm, but no longer in threat of turning into something more, Harry could finish his observation of his friend.

She was wearing very light dress robes in a soft blue color that managed to bring out her eyes. Unlike the one she had worn at the New Year Gala, this robe was more in line with normal wizarding robes with the exception that it was obviously much more expensive and made of a lighter material.

The material used was obviously silk, or some form of silk. It was too light to be acromantula silk, which left Harry slightly baffled as to the fabric it was made from. Whatever the case was, Harry could not deny it looked good on her.

Really good. Because the robes were made out of such a light material they did not do as good a job at hiding her body. While loose fitting like all

standard wizard ware, the material was thin enough that Harry could partially see the way her body was developing. In particular, Harry noticed that Daphne Greengrass was beginning to grow breasts. They were larger than Lisa's, but smaller than Selene's. He didn't know what her size was, but he could tell that she had already started wearing a bra.

Despite doing his best to keep his mind clear, Harry could not help but find himself wondering what else was being hidden under those robes.

Harry also wondered if he was damned to check out all of his female friends every time he met one of them from now on. That was not a very pleasant thought.

Correction: the thought actually left him highly aroused but also incredibly embarrassed, which was what he found unpleasant, not the thoughts themselves.

And all these thoughts and counter arguments to his previous thoughts were beginning to confuse Harry, who was unsure what he should be feeling or thinking at the moment. Thankfully, no one seemed to be focusing on him right now; Daphne was focusing on her father and her father was focused on... someone behind him?

"Oh my gosh! Are you really Harry Potter?"

Ok, so maybe someone was focusing on him.

At the sound of his name being called, Harry turned around and found himself staring at a younger version of Daphne. The only differences Harry could discern aside from a few deceptively small ones like a slight variation in the shape of her eyes, was the shoulder length blond hair that was a shade darker than his friends, and the ocean green eyes. Other than that, she could pass for Daphne's younger clone.

Which, of course, meant that this girl had to be Daphne's sister.

"Astoria," Nathaniel Greengrass' voice, while still dead, sounded almost as if there was a small hint of anger to it. Or maybe that was just feeling of danger he was getting from the atmosphere. "What are you doing here? I thought I told you to stay in your room."

Astoria flinched.

"I... I was in my room," she defended herself. Harry saw her lips trembling. "Daphne had been with me when Alfred came to get her..."

"And so you just decided that you would follow Daphne when I explicitly asked for just her," Nathaniel Greengrass interrupted anything Astoria might have said to defend herself further.

Astoria flinched.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, her head down as she stared at her feet. It looked like she was struggling not to cry.

Harry noticed out of the corner of his eyes that Daphne was looking at her sister with barely disguised sadness and fear. He remembered her telling him how much her sister meant to her. Clearly, she knew that there was something unpleasant in store for Astoria after this meeting.

"Go to your room," Lord Greengrass said, his tone not only brooking no argument, but also sounding even chillier than it normally did. "I will deal with you later."

Harry watched the small scene play itself out. Astoria's entire body looked like it was shivering under her green wizard robes, her lips were trembling and he thought he even saw tears leaking out of the corner of her eyes. She looked very frightened. It was a little unsettling because she looked so much like Daphne.

At the same time, Daphne looked like she wanted to say something to help her sister. He saw her looking between Astoria and her father, worrying her lower lip, as if trying to decide whether or not speaking in her sister's defense would do any good.

Then her eyes met Harry's, her expression pleading.

"My Lord Greengrass," Harry spoke up. It was out of turn, breaching several rules of etiquette, and could very easily end with all of the work he had put into this moment being for nothing.

But he did not like seeing his friend like this, and if possibly ruining his chances of being allowed to see Daphne would stop her from looking so miserable, then so be it.

Nathaniel Greengrass slowly turned his head to look at him. Harry kept up a strong, imperturbable front, even as a powerful chill ran down his spine as the man's dead eyes met his. He could not afford to look weak.

"If I could make a suggestion..."

XoX

The Leaky Cauldron was filled with patrons when the fireplace roared to life, the small fire that had been crackling inside morphing into a raging bonfire of bright green. No one paid much attention to the sight. It was not like this was the first time someone had used the floo network inside of the small pub today, nor would it be the last.

They also did not pay attention when several people stepped out, though if they had known who one of those people were they might have.

The first person to step out of the fireplace was a young girl no older than ten with dark blond hair, ocean green eyes and the brightest, most inquisitive smile anyone would ever see on her face. She was soon followed by two other people; another female who was quite obviously her older sister and a young boy with messy raven hair and killing curse green eyes.

Harry Potter sighed in relief as he stepped out of the fireplace. Never in his life had he been more pleased to no longer be in another person's presence before. Just thinking about the dead gaze that had been penetrating him for the last fifteen minutes was enough to send chills down his spine.

What had he been thinking? Causing such a serious breach in etiquette in order to convince Nathaniel Greengrass to let his youngest daughter join him and Daphne as they met up with their friends.

Harry did not commit very many impulsive acts. To date there were only a handful of actions he had committed that could be considered either

impulsive or stupid, or both.

This particular act would definitely go up there as one of the most impulsive and stupid things he had ever done in his life, right next to attacking a troll without coming up with any kind of plan before hand and jumping on it's back in an act of brazen reckless panic.

"So this is the Leaky Cauldron?" There was a wide smile on Astoria's face as her eyes wandered and her head turned, as if she were trying to take in everything at once. "This place is amazing!"

"Don't run off, Stori," Daphne called out to her sister, who looked like she was about to bolt any second now in her attempt to take in more the small pub.

Harry looked over at Daphne, surprised to see her smiling so warmly in such a public setting. He was so used to seeing her cold demeanor while in public that this look was almost shocking.

Still, if this was the effect that Astoria's presence had on Daphne, then Harry would gladly suffer through the girl's father again.

Her sister stopped, then turned to look at Daphne, who was holding out one of her hands.

"Come on, stay with me. It wouldn't do for you to get lost."

"Right," a sheepish smile spread across Astoria's lips as she walked over to her sister and grabbed the offered hand. "Sorry Daphne, I'm just so excited to finally be allowed out of the house that I sort of forgot you guys were here."

"Of course you were," Daphne sighed in minor exasperation, but there was a soft smile on her face that told Harry she was not all that bothered, if she was bothered at all.

"Wait," Harry started, bringing the attention of the two girls onto himself. He was staring at Astoria with a look of masked shock. "Are you saying this is the first time you've ever left your home?"

"I don't know," Astoria's nose scrunched up cutely as she struggled to remember an instance where she might have left Greengrass Manor. "I think I might have left the house when I was younger, and sometimes I play outside in the back near the gardens, but I don't really remember going anywhere outside our house's boundaries."

Harry took a slow, shuddering breath as he thought through her words and his mind led him to the obvious conclusion that she had never been anywhere public since their mother's death.

It was a difficult pill for someone like him to swallow. Harry had always been fiercely independent ever since he turned five, the year after he had learned to recreate his accidental magic and used it to better his own life. He could not imagine not being allowed out of the house for any reason.

It made him that much more disgusted by Nathaniel Greengrass' actions towards his daughters. Harry would freely admit that he could be callous to others, but those were to people he did not know, strangers in every sense of the word, and even then he would not harm them without due cause. He didn't want to know what kind of person you would have to be to treat your own flesh and blood the way the Head of the House of Greengrass treated his daughters.

"Harry?"

Warmth encased his hand and a shiver of a different kind traveled down his spine. Harry looked down to see his hand being held by another, much more feminine one. Traveling up the light blue fabric, Harry eventually found himself meeting the slightly concerned eyes of Daphne Greengrass.

"Yes?" he asked, taking in a deep breath to control his hormonal impulses. Harry really hoped he would get a handle on those soon or they were going to become a serious problem.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Harry said, squeezing her hand once before letting go. He wanted to hold onto it, but felt it would be in his best interest not to do so. Less chance of him causing an embarrassing scene that way. He could

already feel his body responding to just that simple touch. "I was just thinking about something."

Daphne did not look too convinced, but seemed to realize he was not going to tell her about whatever was bothering him and decided to let it go.

"Alright. We're running a bit late," Harry began as he started walking. "Our friends should already be waiting for us near the entrance to Diagon Alley so we'd best be on our way."

"Is he always like this?" asked Astoria as she and Daphne walked to catch up with Harry. They quickly caught pace with him and Daphne made sure to walk on his left, close enough that she could easily reach out and grab his hand if she wanted to, but far enough that they were not touching.

"Not always," Daphne told her sister quietly. "Just on occasion."

"Huh," Astoria leaned forward to peer around her sister so she could look at Harry. He was walking towards the exit in the back, ignoring the ruckus the people sitting around the tables were making. She leaned back a second later. "Weird."

"I can hear everything you two said just now."

Astoria and Daphne jerked their heads back in surprise. They looked at Harry to see him giving them a mildly amused look.

"Just thought you should know that," he added.

XoX

"Daphne! Harry!"

It was no surprise to anyone that the first person to greet the trio was Tracey. The girl was the most excitable out of their group of friends. Only Hannah could match the brunette Slytherin in sheer enthusiasm, and she was much more polite than the other girl.

Like his experience with Daphne, Harry noticed that Tracey was really quite cute. Her brunette locks of hair framed a pixyish face with a small button nose and lightly glossed pink lips. He could not see anything thanks to those blasted robes, but as he knew that girls entered puberty before boys, he could imagine she was also developing like Lisa and Daphne.

Damn. This really was going to be a problem.

While the other seven members of Harry's and Daphne's group of friends standing outside near the entrance to Diagon Alley turned their heads to look at the three walking out from the Leaky Cauldron along with their chaperones for the day, Tracey quickly began making her way over to them. There was a large grin on her face, and it looked like she was about to give either Harry or Daphne or both of them the largest hug of their lives.

Then she noticed Astoria.

"Eh?"

She blinked several times, as if trying to figure out why there was a smaller, almost identical version of her best friend standing with the two.

She then turned to Daphne.

"What's with the brat?" she asked, hooking a thumb at Astoria.

"B-Brat!?" Astoria sputtered indignantly as she took a menacing step forward. Well, it was supposed to be menacing, but because she was so short and cute it was about as menacing as a small puppy. "I turn ten in a few days, you idiot! I'm not a brat!"

"Idiot!?" Tracey's head snapped towards Astoria, a glare present on her face. "Listen here, you little turd! It's not polite to go around calling people idiots! Especially when it's not true!"

"Just like it's not polite to call someone a brat when it's not true, idiot!"

"Oh boy," Lisa said as she and the others walked up to Harry and

Daphne, who were both staring at the arguing Astoria and Tracey. It was like watching a train wreck. You wanted to look away, but for some reason you just couldn't. "It looks like we finally found someone who's got just as much... spunk as Tracey."

"You call it spunk," Blaise muttered as he watched his friend argue with someone nearly a head shorter than her with a dismayed expression. "I call it stupidity."

Hermione gave a long suffering sigh as she walked up to Tracey and quickly grabbed the girl by the ear.

"Ow! Ow! Ow! Not the ear! Gah! Let go, Hermione!"

"Only if you stop arguing with that girl," Hermione told her friend firmly. "Honestly, Tracey, arguing with someone two years younger than you? You should learn to set an example for your juniors."

"Oh I'll set an example for her!" Tracey growled. "After I smack her around like a — Yeowch!"

While Harry and Daphne managed to keep the surprise off their face due to their training in Occlumency, Susan and Hannah were watching the pair with dropped jaws.

"Do you ever feel like you're missing something whenever you leave for a long time then come back?" Hannah asked no one in particular. "Maybe it's just because this is the first time we've all met up together, but I can't help but feel like I missed out on something big."

"You're not," Lisa told the pair. Out of the entire group, she looked like she was the most used to seeing what was going on between Tracey and Hermione. "Not really, anyways. Tracey, Hermione and I have been spending a bit more time together since none of us went on vacation. At least, not for very long. Harry, Neville and Terry joined us too sometimes, but they also tended to do their own thing when we met up at Diagon Alley."

"We didn't want to go into the new perfume shop that opened up," Neville said to the looks they were getting from Hannah and Susan. Terry

nodded his head in agreement.

"And only Harry and Hermione wanted to go into Flourish and Blotts before we got our book list," Terry added.

"Now there's something I never expected to hear a Ravenclaw say," Blaise muttered, earning an eye roll and slight glare from Terry.

"Besides, you guys were here for one of the times this happened," Lisa informed the two.

"We were?" Hannah sounded very surprised to hear this. Lisa nodded her head.

"Well, you might have just missed it when it happened. Remember when Hermione's mum took us to that muggle pool?"

"I remember that!" Susan blurted out, surprising everyone enough that even Tracey and Hermione stopped struggling and looked at the girl in shock. Seeing all the stares directed at her caused the young girl to flush as red as her hair. "Sorry."

"Why are you apologizing?" The question came from both Astoria and Tracey, who, upon hearing the other speak the exact same words, looked at each other for a moment, then looked away with a huff. While Hermione and Lisa shook their heads in amused exasperation, Blaise rubbed the palm of his left hand against his face.

"I feel like I don't even know her anymore."

"What's that supposed to mean, Blaise?" asked Tracey, looking very suspicious by his choice of words.

"Nothing, nothing," Blaise waved a hand in front of his face, as if warding off some kind of bug. Tracey frowned at her friend, but was soon pulled into a different direction as Daphne finally decided to greet the girl properly.

"So how was your summer in Italy?" Harry asked curiously. He had not heard as much from his friend, who had spent two months in Italy. And

the descriptions he had received in the letters had been rather lackluster in their depiction of the dark skinned boy's time there.

"Oh, you know, nothing to special," Blaise said with a dismissive shrug. "Just a family gathering."

"Your attention to detail never ceases to astound me," Harry's tone was very dry. "That's about the same thing you said in your letters."

"What can I say?" asked Blaise, chuckling a bit as he scraped a hand over his head. "I tend to be a very detail oriented individual."

Harry rolled his eyes at his friends attempt at copying him. It was actually pretty good. Blaise even decided to pull out larger syllable words that only Harry would ever use in a real conversation.

As greetings came to a close, the groups three chaperones decided it was time to get their attention. Clapping her hands together several times, Misses Davis soon gathered the attention of the children around her. With an amused smile on her face, she began speaking.

"It's going to be a bit difficult for such a large group to move around. Therefore, I want each of you to grab onto someone's hand so that none of you get separated."

"Do we really have to do that?" asked Terry, surprising, as the others had expected Tracey to be the one to speak up and act like a petulant child. "I mean... that makes me feel like a kid."

Harry had to actually nod at that. He agreed with Terry, though he would not say anything to dispute the woman before them.

It may have had something to do with the fact that his hands were already occupied, and the warmth from the skin on skin contact was, while not quite distracting, was certainly not helping him any.

"You are a kid," Mister Granger said dryly, only to be lightly elbowed by his wife. Terry flushed red.

"Be nice," she murmured in his ear. As Hermione's father feigned injury

by rubbing his torso where Misses Granger hit him, Misses Davis clapped her hands again to gather attention to herself.

"Now then, each of you follow Harry's, Daphne's, Astoria's and Hannah's example and grab someone's hand so that you don't get separated from the group."

There was a bit of mumbling from a few members of the group, with Tracey being the loudest. Eventually, however, everyone found their hands linked together with someone else's. They looked a lot like a human chain. Misses Davis put a bright smile on her face when she saw this.

"Aw, you guys look so cute! I wish I had a camera!"

The number of scowls she received from the group was rather astounding, and would have put many people at unease had it not been for the fact that they were coming from a bunch of children.

"Now, I need to make a quick stop at Gringotts first so if anyone else needs to make a money withdrawal, this will be your time to do so." She drew her wand and prepared to open the way to Diagon Alley. "Now, as the muggle saying goes, let's get this show on the road, shall we?"

XoX

It was not more than half an hour later that the group left Gringotts with their wallets or purses full. A few of them, like Harry, Daphne and Hannah had brought money with them and did not need to visit their vaults. The rest ended up making a quick pit stop and taking a long, terrifying ride down to the underground vaults so they could grab some money.

After that it was down to the first and most important stop of the day; Flourish and Blotts.

"Geez, it's incredibly crowded here, isn't it?" was Tracey's rhetorical question as she and the others waded their way through the large crowd of people jostling each other to get inside the store. None of them had ever seen the place so crowded before. "Maybe we should wait until the crowd goes away before we start shopping."

"You might have a point there," Hannah looked at the large group of middle aged witches that were literally bumping into each other in their efforts to enter the store. Several people were actually trying to liberally shove others out of the way. It all looked incredibly violent. "I don't know how we're going to get in there right now."

"We could wait until the crowd dies down," Harry spoke up as he looked at the group of people warily. "But if we did that, we wouldn't be able to enter the store until half past four."

"Why is that?" asked Tracey, turning to look at her raven haired friend.

"It may have something to do with the large sign on the window," Daphne stated dryly, pointing with her finger towards the upper floor window. Tracey and the others who had not been paying attention to anything except the crowd all looked up. There on the upper windows was a large banner that proclaimed:

GILDEROY LOCKHART
will be signing copies of his autobiography
MAGICAL ME
Today 12:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.

"Are you serious/We can actually meet him!" Tracey and Hermione squealed at nearly the same time. Hermione then added, "I mean, he's written nearly the whole booklist!"

"Of course that's what you're interested in," Tracey rolled her eyes while Hermione huffed.

"Oh, shush you."

"Speaking of booklist," Neville added, a sheepish look crossing his face as his cheeks became tinged with pink. "What books did we need again?"

"Lost your booklist somewhere, Neville?" asked Blaise, smirking with some amusement. Neville flushed bright red, but nodded.

"The books we need are *Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2. Break with a*

Banshee, Gadding with Ghouls, Holidays with Hags, Travels with Trolls, Voyages with Vampires, Wanderings with Werewolves, and Year with the Yeti," Harry recited all of the books they needed to get dutifully, without even bothering to look at his booklist, which was nowhere in sight.

"Not very original title's are they?" asked Terry, getting a snort of amusement from Blaise.

"No, not very original at all."

"Come on, Daphne!" Astoria shouted excitedly over the loud crowd as she tightened her hold on her sister's hand and tried to pull the older blond girl inside of the store with her. Key word being tried. She was, unfortunately for her, much too small and weighed far too little to pull her sister anywhere. "Hurry up! We get to see a real life celebrity!"

Daphne rolled her eyes a bit, but complied all the same. And since her hand was connected to Harry's, it wasn't long before she was also pulling him inside.

This had the chain reaction pulling everyone else inside since they were all still connected at the hands.

Because they were so small, they managed to push their way through the crowd of people more easily than an adult would. It was still a tight fit though and several people got bumped into or smacked.

"Owch!" Hannah tried to rub her cheek, but it was very difficult when she was holding someone's hand. "Someone just elbowed me in the face!"

"You think that's bad," Lisa winced as she tried to shake her foot. "Someone just stomped on my toes."

"Ugh, this is so not cool. Damn, greedy old bats."

"Language, Tracey."

"...Sorry."

"Is it just me," whispered Terry to Blaise, "or has Tracey begun to run her

mouth even more than she used to."

"I wish it was just you," Blaise muttered with a small shake of his head.

"Tracey?" Harry called out over the noise from the crowd as they finally made it past the large crowd outside, catching his friends attention. His eyes scanned the long line inside of the store that wound it's way to the back of the shop. "Where's your mother? And where are Mister and Misses Granger."

"Mum? She's..." Tracey blinked as she looked around and realized that her mother was not inside with them. A bit of searching yielded no results until Blaise pointed out Misses Davis with the other two adults standing with the other witches that were in line.

She was speaking quite animatedly to Misses Granger, who was smiling and nodding along with everything the woman said while Mister Granger seemed to have a minor scowl on his face.

"Yep, that's mum alright," she said dryly. "Damn, I'm so jealous she's already in line to get an autograph."

"Language, Tracey," Hermione scolded her her friend.

"Right," Tracey scratched the back of her neck. "Sorry."

"Honestly," Hermione huffed as she crossed her arms over her chest. Harry noted that it didn't look like she was growing in that area yet, and he could see her figure more clearly since she was wearing muggle clothing; jeans and a long-sleeved shirt. "Must you swear so much? It's like you've gotten periodically worse throughout the summer."

"Ugh," Tracey flinched.

"Smooth, Trace," Daphne shook her head. "Real smooth."

Tracey blushed.

"Hush up, Daph."

The group soon split up after agreeing to try and get the books they needed separately in the hopes of it making the area around them less crowded and more maneuverable for them. Blaise, Terry and Neville ended up going their own way. Meanwhile, Hermione, Lisa and Tracey headed off to do grab their books then get in line so they could they could get an autograph from Gilderoy Lockhart.

"Looks like it's just as five," Hannah said as she looked at the others. Standing beside her was Harry, Daphne, Astoria and Susan. Astoria had tried to make her way to the line, but Daphne had stopped her from doing so.

"Don't be so impatient, Stori," Daphne said. "Lockhart's not even there right now. It's not like waiting in line is going to make him come out faster."

"But I really want to see a real life celebrity!" Astoria complained.

"You already have," Daphne said dryly, looking over at Harry.

"Ah!" Astoria gasped in surprise, as if just now remembering that Harry was something of an iconic figure in the wizarding world. "I didn't mean to make it sound like you weren't famous either, Harry. I just really want to see Lockhart."

"You and just about every other girl between the ages of eight and eighty," Harry replied with a shake of his head. He didn't know how Lockhart dealt with his own fame. While Harry found it useful, it was so incredibly annoying. He could only imagine how Lockhart felt.

"Personally, I don't care a single wit for Lockhart," Daphne declared, much to the surprise of Astoria.

"Why not?"

"Because he's a fraud," Hannah chimed in. It was the first and only time Harry had ever heard her say something even mildly insulting. Astoria frowned while Susan nodded her head in agreement.

"Really?" asked Harry.

"My aunty once had a run in with Lockhart," Susan began to explain. "She didn't like the man at all. Claimed he was nothing more than a..." Susan's face flushed a bit, but she continued. "Fraudulent idiot with no sense of pride and the moral ambiguity of a slug."

"Pretty harsh words coming from someone so respectful like Amelia Bones," Harry said as Hannah nodded.

"And if Susan's aunt is the one saying it, then you know it must be true."

"I still think none of you know what you're talking about," Astoria grumbled before being shushed by Daphne. The group of five eventually managed to collect a copy of *Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2* and met up with the rest of their friends in the line near Misses Davis, who was looking even more excited to see Gilderoy Lockhart than Astoria, Hermione and Tracey combined.

"This is so exciting!" Tracey practically squealed. "I can't believe we're going to actually meet Gilderoy Lockhart."

"I don't know why you're so excited," Daphne sighed.

"Aw, come on, Daph!" Tracey whined at her best friend. "Don't be like that."

"I have to agree with Daphne," Terry added while Blaise gave a nod of his head. "Maybe it's just me, but Golderoy Lockhart doesn't seem all that special. His stories are way too fantastical to be real."

"How could you say that!?" Tracey sounded aghast at the thought that someone did not believe the books written by Gilderoy Lockhart were true. Hermione and Astoria seemed to be of the same opinion, if their gaping mouths were any indication. "Of course everything that happened in those books are real!"

"I think I would know if these books were real or not," Terry sounded very convinced of himself. "My parents are authors so I know a lot about story writing. First off, if this book was about a real life situation, I doubt the titles would be something as corny and horrible sounding as these ones. They sound more like a poetry story for children than a biographical tale

of a real life event."

"That doesn't mean anything," Tracey argued, "and besides, these titles are catchy. You ever think that maybe that's why he gave these books those titles?"

"I'm beginning to think we may want to keep these two away from each other," Lisa mused to the others, those who had not gotten caught up in the argument.

"Why bother?" asked Daphne with a shrug. "If she's not arguing with Terry, Tracey will just end up doing so with someone else. That girl practically lives for arguing with others... and shoving her foot in her mouth."

"Besides," Blaise added after he was sure Daphne was finished. "It's entertaining to watch these two go at it like that."

Lisa looked over at Terry and Tracey as they continued to argue over whether or not Gilderoy Lockhart's books were real or fiction. Standing near them and watching the two were Astoria and Hermione, who looked like they were both siding with Tracey, though the blond girl seemed a tad reluctant. She had obviously not forgiven Tracey for her brat comment earlier.

"I'll never understand how those two can argue about anything and everything," Neville said, shaking his head. Harry just shook his head while Daphne spared a glance at the round faced boy.

"Fortunately for you, you don't have too."

A few seconds later, Gilderoy Lockhart came swaggering out from behind a curtain that looked like it had been set up specifically for that purpose. As almost every female in the vicinity swooned, Harry studied the man and determined in that instant that none of the stories written about him were actually true.

The first thing Harry took in about the man was his looks and wardrobe. There was no denying that from an objective standpoint Gilderoy Lockhart was what many women would consider handsome. He had a

strong jaw line, jaw length wavy blond hair and bright blue eyes. Looking at the man, Harry figured that he was what Hitler would have called a perfect Aryan.

At least until the psychopathic dictator got a good look at Lockhart's clothing. The man was wearing the biggest eyesore Harry had ever seen. His robes were an atrociously loud color of forget-me-not blue that exactly matched his eyes, and there was a pointy wizard's hat sitting on his head at a garish angle. All in all, the man looked like a showboater, and the way he was hamming it up to the crowd only served to provide more evidence towards that theory.

It could have also had something to do with the table Lockhart took a seat at. Surrounding the man on both sides were large posters of himself, all winking and flashing a dazzling smile with white teeth at the crowd.

Harry stopped paying attention to the man after that. There was nothing interesting to look at as far as he was concerned. Instead, he turned to Susan and Daphne, who were the closest to him in the line and began conversing with them.

As he conversed with the two girls, and Blaise and Terry joined in the on the conversation, Harry took a short look around the room at all the witches and wizards. Despite having never spoken with any of them, he had seen almost all of them at one point or another during his excursions in Diagon Alley. There were only a few he had no memories of. He chalked that up to them being housewives who rarely left their homes or not being in Diagon Alley when he was.

"Harry?"

At the sound of his voice being called, Harry turned around and came face to face with Cassidy Fergand. The girl was staring at him with blinking, inquisitive eyes as she realized he was not alone.

Harry was focused more on her looks than her expression. He easily took notice of how attractive Cassidy looked today in her soft blue robes and plaited black hair. And maybe it was just him, in fact, he was sure it was just his hormones at work, but the young woman looked even more beautiful than she usually did.

It was a struggle not to let his eyes roam down to her bust, which was larger than even Selene's and easily visible underneath her robes.

"Good afternoon, Cassidy," Harry said respectfully, keeping his new appreciation for the young woman's beauty well hidden. Thankfully, he already had a lot of practice with that today. "How's work?"

"Same as always," Cassidy replied with some amusement seeping into her voice. She eyed the many witches standing within the bookstore and shook her head. "Though we are a bit busier today than we usually are."

"Yes, I can see that," Harry noted in a dry tone. He shook his head before deciding to be polite and make introductions. "I don't think I introduced you to all of my friends, have I?" As Cassidy shook her head, Harry took the time to introduce the group he had grown close to. "You already know Hermione..."

"How could I not," Cassidy looked at the young bushy haired girl who was speaking with Tracey and Astoria about Gilderoy Lockhart. While the bushy haired witch did not come in as much as Harry, she was probably the second most common customer.

"Yes, well, the two with her are Tracey Davis and Astoria Greengrass. And these are my other friends, Hannah Abbott, Susan Bones, Daphne Greengrass, Neville Longbottom, and Blaise Zabini."

"Nice to meet you all," Cassidy greeted with a smile as the others greeted her in turn. She then focused back on Harry. "Listen, so I've been thinking about that offer you gave me."

"And have you decided on whether you want to accept it or not?" asked Harry, now fully engrossed in his conversation.

"If you can really do as you said, then I'll accept."

"In that case," Harry pulled out a small envelope that he had brought with him, the same envelope he had taken to keeping on his person every time he entered Diagon Alley just in case he ran into Cassidy.

"Take this to the Department of Magical Jobs and licenses. The process

will probably take a while to get sorted out, but with my name and your NEWTs' you shouldn't have too much trouble. When you have done that, owl me and I'll send a letter to the Goblins asking them to buy out one of the unused lots in Diagon Alley."

"I'll also send you all the notes I have made on potions as well as a more comprehensive book on how ingredients react to each other."

"Alright, I'll do that," Cassidy took the envelope from his hand. Harry felt a slight shiver crawl from his hand, up his forearm and bicep, move along his shoulder, before going all the way down from his spine to his toes from the contact. "Thanks again for giving me this opportunity, Harry. I've been wanting to get out of here for a while now, but haven't been able to."

"It's fine," Harry waved her thanks off. "I know how difficult it can sometimes be to get a good job. And it's not like this isn't going to benefit me as well. Without someone who managed to get those NEWTs, I would never be able to even think about opening up a shop here."

After a few shared parting words, and Cassidy thanking him one last time, the young woman left, the letter clutched in her hand.

"What was that about?" asked Daphne, eying the young woman as she disappeared into the crowd curiously before turning her attention to Harry. Beside her, Hannah, Susan, Lisa, Neville, Terry and Blaise all leaned forward, interested in hearing about what their friend was doing with that girl.

"Sounded like some kind of business proposal," Blaise added with a speculative gleam in his eyes. "Something about a potions shop, I would wager."

"I plan on opening an apothecary that not only sells ingredients, but also makes more effective than normal potions at reduced prices," Harry informed them quietly, his fingers absently twitching as he cast a small variation of the silencing charm around them. It would keep their conversation hidden from anyone who was listening in, but they could still hear everything being said around them. "Because I don't have control over my family vaults until I reach the age of majority, I've been trying to find ways to increase the money in my mother's vault, which is what I use

for all of my non school related buys."

"And so you decided you want to open a potion shop?" asked Neville, sounding very interested in what he was saying. It was not surprising, considering Herbology was a field that ran parallel with Potion brewing. Many plants and herbs were used in the brewing of potions.

"Yes," Harry nodded. "I already have the license to buy out property thanks to a favor someone owes me, but I need someone who has a NEWT in Arithmancy and Potions who can get a license to sell and make potions before I can even think of opening my business."

"Cassidy has both, one of the few who do. Naturally I offered her the job of running the shop. The store would technically be under my name, but she would be the one in charge. I would have my potions shop, she would no longer be working at a bookstore and we would both be making a decent amount of money. It's a win-win situation for the two of us."

"Bloody hell," Terry swore.

"You know, it's a very good thing Hermione's too busy talking with Tracey to scold you for cursing," Lisa commented, her eyes flickering to the trio standing with Misses Davis and the Grangers. She shook her head as she saw that they were *still* talking about Lockhart. How could anyone be so enthusiastic about meeting someone, even if that someone was a celebrity?

"You're probably right," Terry also looked over at Hermione, who was watching Tracey alongside Astoria with wide eyes as the brunette made some wild gesticulation about something. "Still, who does something like this? Opening up a Potions Shop at twelve? That's crazy!"

"It's ambitious," Blaise added his own two cents, smirking. "I like it."

"I guess I can see why most people would think it's unusual," Harry admitted, "but honestly, I just want to accomplish something no one else has managed to do before. Opening up shops and stores when I'm still at Hogwarts definitely qualifies."

There were other things he wanted to do, of course, like write a book

before graduating and create his own power bloc amongst his peers so he would have allies after he graduated and took his place on the Wizengamot. But these would have to wait for a while. Even though he could gain allies now, it was still going to be six years before any of that would become relevant.

"You're certainly well on your way to doing that," Hannah chimed, shaking her head. "Still seems a little weird for someone our age to open a shop."

Harry shrugged, as if to say 'that's just how I am'.

"It can't be Harry Potter?"

Even though the words were not spoken very loudly, everyone in the entire book store heard them. The silence that settled upon everyone there was as complete as the noise that had once filled the area.

Harry mechanically turned his head towards the source of the voice, not really wanting to, but knowing that there was nothing else he really could do.

There, standing up from his seat and staring at him was none other than Gilderoy Lokhart, the person who had spoken. If the look Jeanette had given him frightened him, then the look this man was giving him made him wish he could run as far away as he possibly could. Being stared at like a piece of meat was preferable to the look he was getting now.

Harry could practically see the stars appearing in the man's eyes.

This was so not good.

XoX

The day had not turned out as well as Harry had hoped it would. He would have thought that getting to spend time with all his friends in one place after only seeing them sporadically throughout the summer would have been nice, and it would have, if that idiot hadn't ruined most of his good mood.

"Man, I can't believe you actually got to stand up there with Gilderoy

Lockhart," Tracey complained as they made their way to the Leaky Cauldron. The sun was beginning to go down and now that everyone's shopping was finished, Misses Davis and Mister and Misses Granger had decided it was time for them to part ways. "That's so unfair."

"Then you could have bloody well switched places with me for all I care," Harry scowled as he thought of the time he had wasted standing in front of that gods forsaken crowd with Lockhart hamming it up to his fans. Worse still, the man used him, *him!* As a means of boosting his already overly inflated fame.

Harry would have liked to say that was the worst of it, but no, it wasn't even close. The worst part was that he couldn't do a damn thing to stop the man from using him for his own purposes without either looking jealous or like some kind of petulant child. Because he could not afford to have his reputation marred by someone who was obviously quite popular, he had been forced to endure the man's long winded and pompous ramblings as he spoke to the crowd, all the while invading his personal space like the idiot had no clue what the term meant.

And even that might be the worst of it as Gilderoy Lockhart had apparently gotten the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts, which meant he would be having to deal with the showboaters presence for an entire year.

"Language, Harry!" Hermione scolded her friend.

"Ugh, sorry, Hermione." Harry ran a hand through his messy hair. "I guess my agitation got the better of me."

"I don't see why you're so angry," Tracey mumbled with a huff. "You got to stand next to Gilderoy Lockhart."

"And I wish I had been standing as far away from him as possible," Harry returned dryly. Astoria, Tracey and Hermione looked scandalized, like they couldn't possibly fathom why he would not want to stand anywhere near such a great man.

"I feel for you, mate," Terry spoke up, causing the trio of girls who were goggling at Harry to glare at him. Terry gulped at the terrifying sight. He

had obviously not been subjected to such glares before.

Perennelle was far more horrifying than these three could ever hope to be.

"So even the great Harry Potter can be annoyed by some things," Daphne's tone was a tad dry as she spoke.

"There are a lot of things that aggravate me," Harry informed her. "Being paraded in front of a group of people for someone else's benefit happens to be one of them."

The group soon entered the backyard to the Leaky Cauldron. As the portal to Diagon Alley closed behind them, they found themselves standing inside of the small, dirty looking pub.

Because it was that time between shifts for people who worked, there were not a lot of people yet, just a smattering of men and women sitting in chairs, sipping their pints of alcohol. It would likely pick up soon, but Harry hoped to be gone before then.

Hermione was the first to leave at her parent's urging. Before that, she gave Harry a breath taking hug that did a very good job of depriving Harry's lungs of oxygen.

Thank the gods for magical reinforcement.

"I'll see you later, Harry," Hermione said as she stepped away.

"I'll see you at Platform nine and three-quarters," Harry returned. After saying goodbye to the others, and in particular Tracey, Lisa, Neville and Blaise, she and her parents went on their way.

One by one, all of Harry's friends left until it was just him, Astoria, Daphne, Tracey and her mother.

"I guess this is where I say so long," Tracey gave her blond friend a strong hug. "It was good to finally see you outside of school, Daph."

"Nice seeing you as well," was the response we got. "Hopefully, now that

my father is letting Harry escort me, we'll be able to see each other more often."

"That's right," Tracey's eyes flickered to Harry, a mischievous grin on her face. "I forgot about that. Just how did you convince her old man to let her and Astoria out of the house?"

"A lot of time and effort," Harry said. Tracey gave him a pout.

"That wasn't very informative."

"No, no it wasn't."

Tracey rolled her eyes a bit at the typical response, before sharing a quick hug.

Quick for Tracey at any rate. Harry's body almost reacted when he felt her slowly developing chest press against him through the fabric of their robes. It was only his incredible will that stopped his arousal from becoming obvious.

"Whatever, I'll see you at the start of the year, ok?"

"Right, stay out of trouble."

"Don't I always."

"You don't want me to answer that," Harry, Daphne and Misses Davis all said at the same time. The three shared a small smile while Tracey huffed and Astoria giggled. Soon after, the brunette Slytherin left via floo like most of their friends, leaving Harry, Astoria and Daphne alone.

"Stori, why don't you go on ahead and wait for me in the lobby," Daphne suggested.

"Okay," Astoria agreed. Before she left, the younger blond turned to Harry and gave him a surprising yet quick hug. "Thanks for convincing Lord Greengrass to let me go with you. I had a lot of fun!"

Harry frowned at the term she used for her own father, but couldn't really

blame her for it. Nathaniel Greengrass, from what he had seen, was no father to either of the girl's. One he ignored and the other was a political tool. There wasn't exactly any love lost between them.

"We'll do this again next year, if you and Daphne would like to," Harry suggested. "Maybe we can even do more than just go shopping for school supplies." As Astoria beamed happily, Harry locked eyes with Daphne, who was giving him a warm smile of approval. The look made his heart flutter and his body feel like it had been shoved into a sauna.

"I would like that."

Astoria soon left, leaving just him and Daphne alone. This was the first time he had been truly alone with the girl since that night they had spoken in the room housing the Mirror of Erised. Perhaps it was due to his increasing hormones, but Harry had no clue what to say.

Fortunately, he didn't have to.

"I wanted to thank you for talking to my father," Daphne said. "Not just for me, but for my sister too. She's never even been out of the house since..."

"Since your mother died," Harry finished. Daphne closed her eyes in pain as she gave him a nod. "You don't need to thank me for this, Daphne. You... ah," Harry looked away, flushing a bit. It was getting incredibly hard to keep looking into those beautiful blue eyes. "You mean a lot to me so... so don't think of this as something you need to thank me for. I aided you because I wanted to, not because I was hoping you would be grateful to me or something similar."

"And that's why I am grateful to you."

Harry sucked in a breath as Daphne closed the small distance between them and took his hands in her own. Standing this close to her, Daphne's scent was nearly overpowering. It was a lovely combination of vanilla and strawberries that were driving his hormone charged body insane.

It was a miracle that he managed to keep from blushing. Even still, his pants were beginning to feel uncomfortably tight.

"I know you, Harry," Daphne said, her eyes looking at him with an intensity he did not see very often in the girl. Or anyone else for that matter. In fact, before now, only Selene had ever given him that kind of look. "I know you very well, and I know that you understand and embrace the Slytherin way. You don't do anything that doesn't benefit you in some way. Even befriending everyone you know was done for a reason."

It was not surprising to Harry that she knew this. Daphne Greengrass had been trained since she was five in the ways of pure-blood culture and politics. The only other person who was as astute in their observations of him as Daphne was Blaise.

"I don't think that way anymore, you know." Sure, his friends had not started off as such, pawns to be used in his political plays, but that had changed over time. After getting to know them, Harry could honestly say the nine people he had gathered around him at Hogwarts were definitely friends, not just pieces in his power games.

"I know," Daphne smiled. "You may try to be cold and ruthless, and you can be on occasion, but I don't really think that's who you are."

Harry raised an eyebrow.

"And who am I?"

"Harry Potter, a good person whose had to grow up faster than most people should and my... someone I care about very much." As she finished speaking, Daphne Greengrass' cheeks took on a lovely hue of pink.

Harry found his breath stolen from him. With the small blush staining her cheeks, Daphne looked even more beautiful than she normally did. Her gorgeous blue eyes were no longer chips of ice, with the small measure of privacy granted to them, they were currently warm enough that Harry felt his legs begin to feel weak just from looking at them. The pink of her cheeks really brought out and enhanced just how silky and flawless her creamy skin was, and matched the color of her lips perfectly.

Those lips. Harry found his mouth indescribably dry as he looked at those lips. Visions of the kiss Selene had given him plagued his mind, only

instead of the erotic vampire featuring in them it was the vision of beauty in front of him. He longed to claim those lips with his own, to partake of them and —

"Harry?"

"Guh!"

Harry jerked backwards as he realized he had been staring at Daphne for several seconds without speaking. He looked up at Daphne's eyes to see her staring at him with startled, slightly wide eyes. Her cheeks had become even darker than before and her breathing had become a soft pant.

It was only then that Harry realized he had been leaning in towards her.

"I'm sorry! I'm so, so sorry!" Harry's voice cracked. He would have cursed himself for displaying such weakness, moment of puberty or not, but he was too busy panicking over the fact that he had almost kissed one of his friends. "I am so, so, so sorry!"

"It's... it's fine," Daphne murmured, her cheeks growing an even darker shade of red. "I... I have to go!"

As Harry watched Daphne throw some floo powder into the fire place and transport herself home, he used every swear and curse he had picked up in as many languages as he knew within the confines of his mind. He had screwed up. He had screwed up so badly.

By the seven deadly sins and all nine circles of hell, when was his suffering otherwise known as puberty going to end?

Alright, another chapter down. This one hit the 186 review mark, and I can't thank you guys enough for that. I'm really beginning to feel the love... and the hate, but mostly the love so it's all good.

Anyways, please let me know your thoughts on this chapter. Love it? Hate it? What did you like about it and what would you like to see me change in the future? Your reviews could very well influence

which direction I take this story.

And as always, please be sure to check out my blog: Thoughts and Wonderings of a Fanfiction Writer, where all your questions will be answered.

Yes, that includes questions like 'what is the meaning of life?' and 'why is Pokemaster12 an idiot?'.

Missing the Hogwarts Express

Chapter 10: Missing the Hogwarts Express

I was once more standing within Nicolas Flamel's alchemy lab. The many oil lamps along the walls cast their light into the room, their luminescence casting shadows on the ground.

Standing before me was my teacher, who was looking at me with a smile that was one part amused condescension (which I had grown used to) and one part proud. I could tell he was pleased with my work. Not that I expected anything less.

"Well, my young apprentice, it has been a very eventful summer." Nicolas Flamel's smile broadened with an almost childish enthusiasm. "I am pleased to say that you have surpassed my expectations magnificently."

"Thank you, Master Flamel," I accepted the praise graciously, nodding my head and allowing a small smile to play on my face, even when all I really wanted to do was bask under the praise.

I had never realized how good being praised for your hard work truly felt until after becoming apprenticed to Nicolas Flamel. Sure, I had always been praised by my teacher's at school at my Professor's at Hogwarts, but it was different here. I wasn't learning information I could lecture on in my sleep or simple spells I had mastered wandlessly before even coming to Hogwarts. I was learning Alchemy, one the most challenging magics in the world.

According to Flamel, at least.

"And I can't help but notice that you have once again created furniture," the twenty looking six hundred year old immortal said slyly. His eyes once more glanced over at my creation. A rather nice looking bed.

The bed was a combination of modern utilitarian design and Renaissance style extravagance. It was a large king sized bed made with gentle

curves that flowed together in a seamless fashion and had motifs of the Potter family crest and motto imbedded into the wood.

The wood was made of a dark oak that bordered on black. Under the bed, instead of there being a space where someone could hide under if they were so inclined, there were several drawers that could be pulled out. This not only made it easier to put items 'under' the bed, but would also save up space in my room by allowing me a place to put some of my items away that did not involve laying them against the wall or leaving them on the floor.

I also looked at my creation, before shrugging.

"I figured if I was going to be learning to use alchemy to create objects, I might as well create objects that will be useful to me."

That was why I had been spending so much time making furniture. While the furniture in my room was nice, it wasn't what I wanted. Even if no one from the magical world ever saw my room, I wanted it to look as nice as the ones I had seen at the Flamel Estate. Call me vain, but I had come to enjoy the renaissance styled rooms and wanted that for myself.

Aside from my sword that I first made, all of my creations to date have been furniture of some kind.

My teacher looked amused.

"I've said it before and I'll say it again; you are the most unusual child I have ever met."

I like to think I showed great restraint when my right eye didn't twitch at the way he commented on my age. That, or I was just growing used to the man making jabs at how young I was.

"And now, my young apprentice, I am afraid our time has come to an end. You have taken what I taught you and applied it to your work. There is nothing more for you to learn from me."

It was hard to tell whether Flamel was actually disappointed or just hamming it up. He seemed genuinely regretful that my time learning

under him was ending, but at the same time the way he was holding his forearm over his eyes, rubbing them as he sniffled made me think he was just trying to screw with me.

"To think my cute little apprentice has learned all he can from me in just a few months..." Crocodile tears sprang to the man's eyes. I knew they were fake because Flamel never cried. I also sensed him cast some kind of wandless spell, which I am beginning to believe was a modified version of the augmenti charm. "I have..." Sniffle. "Never been more proud!"

I gave a long suffering sigh and began rubbing my face with the palm of my hand. Just go with it Harry. Let the man have his fun. It's the least you could do after everything he taught you.

"One more thing before you go, apprentice," Nicolas' small moment filled with crocodile tears ended as quickly as it began, his face drying up as if he had never been crying in the first place. Definitely some kind of spell. Maybe an illusion of some kind. Hmm... "There are many alchemists out there who claim mastery. You and I both know they are fools who know so little about true alchemy they aren't worth listening to."

I nodded my head. Having learned from Nicolas Flamel, the premiere master of alchemy for the past six hundred years, I could safely say that no one else understood alchemy like he did. Most hardly even understood it at all.

"You are one of the few alchemists in this world now. We are a small, selective group. Very few ever make it to the point where they can call themselves true alchemists, and only one currently holds the title of master."

It sounded incredibly arrogant of him to say that, but I knew he wasn't actually being arrogant and just stating facts. The truth was Nicolas Flamel was the only Master Alchemist in the world. No one else had accomplished as much, seen as much, experienced as much and learned as much within the field of alchemy as Flamel had.

That was the reason I held his praise in such high regard.

"I believe that you have what it takes to become the second person to bear the title 'Master of Alchemy', Harry." It had been the first time I've ever heard my teacher use my name. For a moment, I was actually stunned. "Keep working hard, create more circles, and you may begin to understand the true heights that alchemy can take you. Remember this, apprentice, you have only attained mastery when you can do transmutation without the need to use a transmutation circle."

Which basically meant that until I understood how deconstructing and reconstructing worked with each element, principle and all of the elemental and principle combinations as well as how to direct the flow of my own magic to accomplish those tasks so well I no longer needed the circle (or as Flamel called them, training wheels) to do my transmutations, I would not be considered a master.

"I understand."

It looked like I truly had a long road ahead of me before I could be considered a master in alchemy. Most people would probably discouraged by this news. I know there are a lot of people who dislike anything that requires you to put a serious amount of effort into something. Most magical beings are like that.

I was not. The challenge presented to me here was one that got my blood pumping. It excited me in ways few things could. Just thinking of the long and difficult challenge that lay before me as I made my way to becoming the second person to ever lay claim to the title of 'Master Alchemist' would be enough to inspire me for years to come and force me to push myself to new heights.

My own thoughts were interrupted by the amused voice of my master.

"If you psyche yourself up any further, you may explode."

Coming back to reality, I shook my head and chided myself on getting so focused on my own thoughts. It was a bit of a problem I've always had and something I really should work on fixing.

But that was for another time.

I showed my appreciation to the man who had trained me over the summer by giving him a bow.

"Thank you again for agreeing to take me on as your apprentice."

"It was no problem, no problem." Master Flamel waved my thanks off with a smile. "You were a delight to teach. Not many people are so focused and dedicated to learning, especially at your age. You young people are always more interested in getting things done now, then taking the time to learn things properly. It was refreshing to meet someone like you for change."

I didn't let his comments on my age bother me this time. Well, not much at any rate. I was simply too happy to truly get upset by his words.

"Now, you had best be off, Mister Potter. Your apprenticeship has come to an end, and there is nothing left for you to learn here."

I nodded. It was time for me to leave. Giving one last bow, I turned around and made my way out of the alchemy lab.

As I made my way to the Entrance Hall where I would use the portkey given to me to apparate back home, I allowed my thoughts to wander. Summer was coming to an end. There was one more week left before school started. I could not help but feel like this had been a long time in coming. This summer had felt extraordinarily long for just three months.

This may have had something to do with the fact that I had been using a time turner to travel back in time thereby extending the length of summer by about half, meaning I had spent more along the lines of four and a half months instead of the typical three. But that was a type of semantics I had no desire to get into.

Time travel was an utterly baffling concept. One that I would not be even thinking about until I was well into my magical career.

"Harry?"

I stopped midstep at the sound of that voice; that beautiful, lilting accent. I recall Perennelle once telling me why she still spoke in an accent even

though she could easily get rid of it the day after I rescued Selene. I could now say with one hundred percent honesty that I understood why Nicolas Flamel loved it so much.

Her accent really was sexy.

Turning around, I came face to face with Perennelle, who looked even more gorgeous than she usually did. She had put her hair into a ponytail today, making her look even younger than her twenty-something appearance and allowed me to see her slender and graceful neck.

Her clothing was much more trendy and in style for women who were in their mid twenties than what she usually wore. I was actually surprised by what she was wearing, as it did not seem like her type of clothing at all.

Covering her torso was a yannis black lace top that was almost completely translucent. Beneath that was a tight fitting spaghetti strap shirt that conformed to the woman's large breasts and thin waist like a second skin and left her slender arms bare. She wasn't wearing a bra, and I could see her nipples poking out against the fabric of the shirt.

Her wide hips and small, shapely bottom were being covered by black denim shorts that revealed just a tiny hint of her deliciously tight derriere; not enough to truly be revealing, but certainly enough that I wished they would show just a little more. The pants were stitched up the sides, adding a strange sense of sex appeal to them.

I gulped as my eyes traveled below that. I can honestly admit I have never seen so much skin before in my life. Her long, lean legs appeared to go on forever. It was an endless expanse of creamy looking skin that paradoxically did end in a pair of latrice ankle boots with thick overlapping straps that had adjustable buckles on the sides.

I'm pretty sure I just died of sexy. It did not help that Perennelle seemed to notice that I was staring at just about every part of her body my eyes could see and put on a sinful smile that I imagine she would probably use in the bedroom.

"From zat expression on your face, I take eet you approve?" she asked, twirling around for me. Was it just me? Or had she thickened her accent

when she said that?

I was honestly surprised that the moan of approval and desire I wanted to unleash did not escape my mouth. For a second, a very long second, I could not say anything. I felt like I had been struck momentarily dumb.

Breath, Potter. Breath.

"Why..." my voice sounded incredibly choked, even to my own ears. "Why are you dressed like... like..." I couldn't even complete the sentence, such was my shock and arousal at the sight before me.

"Why am I dressed so provocative?" I know she purred that last word out in French on purpose. I just know it. Of course, she acted like she did not notice what her words did to me as she continued speaking. "Nicolas and I are going clubbing tonight."

She then giggled and gave me a conspiratorial look, as if she were hiding some great secret. Both the sight and sound were some of the most mesmerizing I had in my memory, even beating out Selene. Unlike my vampire... friend, it was clear that Perennelle knew how to use what she had perfectly. She had experience.

"Well, Nicolas does not know we are going yet." She winked at me. "But I think I can convince 'im to see things my way, don't you?"

I absently nodded. Nicolas didn't stand a chance.

"I... I had not realized you were into clubbing," I mumbled as my eyes trailed up and down those beautiful legs. I could tell she worked them out. They reminded me of those legs I often see on female gymnasts I saw when watching the Olympics, only not quite as large and bulky. But by the gods were they well toned.

"I do not do so very often," Perennelle admitted, walking closer to me with a seductive sway of her hips. I was wondering if she was doing that on purpose. It was hard to tell since she seemed to always walk with a bit of a sway. "However, this new club looks very interesting and I wish to see what all the hype is."

"Ah... well..." I began awkwardly. A part of me was screaming to run away. Another part was telling me that I should push this beautiful creature exuding sexual eroticism against the wall and make her mine.

Gods. Lisa's books really have corrupted me.

"I'll just leave you too it then. Take care of yourself, Madam Perennelle."

"Just a moment, 'arry."

I shuddered at the way she said my name. Really, this woman could probably make men cream themselves just by speaking.

"Before you go I just wanted to know..." by now she was completely in my personal space, close enough that I could smell her heavenly scent. It was a mixture of vanilla and her own natural scent. I couldn't place it, but it smelled spicy. "...Do you zink I'm sexy?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but was denied the opportunity to say anything when Perennelle shoved her tongue down my throat.

XoX

Harry Potter did not awaken with a sharp gasp of surprise, arousal and a startled expression, nor was the process of waking up long and drawn out. It was merely a shift from being unconscious to conscious. One moment he was asleep. The next he was wide awake.

It was good to see some things had returned to the status quo, even if other things had not.

Sitting up in the bed, Harry took around the guest room he was sleeping in at the Crawfts. While he let his eyes roam over the rather plain looking room, his body began to stretch and work out the few kinks he had gained while tossing and turning from last nights memories/erotic dream.

A quick look outside confirmed it was still fairly early. Sol had yet to truly rise over Terra's event horizon and was just barely peaking above the buildings. Only the splash of light pinks and purples signified that the sun would soon break out across the sky.

Deciding that now would be the best time to get up and shower (he did not want a relapse of what happened when he had slept over at the Crawft's during Christmas break), the young Potter heir stood up and began making his way towards the bathroom.

He did not even bother looking at the mess he had made of his sheets. Simply waved his hand and magically cleaned them.

After taking a quick shower filled with cold water, Harry returned to his room and got himself dressed in normal, non magical clothing; a pair of nice fitting black jeans, a dark green T-shirt with a King Cobra imprinted on the front and sneakers.

He looked outside of the window again. The sun was beginning to rise. He must have spent more time in the shower than he had realized. Knowing Misses Crawft, she would already be up and cooking breakfast.

Deciding that the best course of action he could take would be to wake his most likely still heavily sleeping friend, Harry made his way out of his room and towards Lisa's room.

As he stopped in front of the door to his best friends room, Harry knocked on the door just in case his friend was actually awake.

"Lisa?" he called out, knocking once more. "Lisa, are you awake?"

He waited for several seconds. When no answer came to him, Harry opened the door and quickly slipped inside.

The room inside was dark. Lisa had covered the windows with her blinds., preventing the rays of sunlight from streaming in into the room. A quick glance confirmed nothing had changed since he had last been inside. It still looked incredibly girly, posters of her favorite boy bands hung on the walls, the book shelf filled to the brim with romance novels was there too, as well as the desk and chair he and Lisa had spent a number of times sitting at while he helped her study for a test.

Then there was the bed. He could see the softly breathing form of his best friend laying in it, his enhanced vision picking out more details in the dark than any pair of human eyes should be capable of.

Making his way over to the bed, his footsteps silent as he walked on the soft carpeting, the young raven haired child found himself staring at his still sleeping friend.

As was the case on most times he had woken his friend up, Lisa had kicked the covers off some time during the night and was now laying on her back in the center of the bed, her arms stretched wide and her legs spread out as if she were trying to cover the entire bed by herself. She was wearing a cute pair of pink pajama bottoms and a Hello Kitty shirt with string straps. The left string had, at some point during the night, slipped off her shoulder and was showing a bit more skin than it normally would.

Harry gulped as he let his eyes wander the expanse of smooth looking skin. Gods, Lisa was adorable even in her sleep! How weird was that?

And what was it with every girl he knew being so utterly bewitching?

Shaking his head, Harry quickly got over his moment of teenage hormones, which had been getting much easier to do as time went on and made to sit down on the edge of the bed. Lisa shifted at his weight, but did not move or otherwise give any signs she had noticed his presence.

Reaching out with a hand, Harry gently removed a strand of long, brown hair that had gotten in his friends face and tucked it behind her ear.

"Lisa," Harry said, using his normal voice as opposed to speaking softly. He had finally gotten over that weird human habit of speaking in a hushed whisper that most people had when waking others up. "Lisa, it's time to get up."

"Nnggg," a strange noise issued forth from his friend's mouth as she began to wake up. Not at all that unusual all things told. Lisa often made strange sounds, especially when waking up. Harry didn't know why. He figured it was a strange quirk.

Besides, he thought it was cute anyways.

Brown eyes eventually fluttered open and blinked several times as Lisa's

eyesight adjusted to the darkness of the room. She looked around for a second before her eyes landed on her friend.

"Harry..." Lisa was stopped from saying anything else with a long, loud yawn. Acting on nothing more than instinct, Lisa's arms stretched out over her head while her legs began stretching as well.

Harry's lips twitched as he watched. This girl really was too cute for her own good.

"Good morning, Lise," Harry said. Lisa blinked at the new nickname. Even in the darkness he could see the flush on his friend's cheeks. "I figured I would let you know your mother is making breakfast so you should probably get ready."

"M'kay. I'll be out in ju..." Lisa's mouth opened widely as she yawned again, stretching the vowel out for a good number of seconds, "...ust a minute," she finished, smacking her lips a few times.

Harry stood up as Lisa made to sit up on the bed. As the girl blinked her eyes blearily, a hand came up to cutely rub the sleep out of them.

"I kinda wish you were the one cooking breakfast," Lisa mumbled for a second as her hand absently went the strap that had slipped down so she could pull it back up. Obviously, his friend was not fully awake yet. "I always love your cooking, and since this is the last day we'll get to see each other until Christmas..." she trailed off a bit, not wanting to continue that line of thought.

"Sorry to disappoint," Harry joked, trying to lighten the mood. It worked, partially at least. Lisa cracked him a small smile. "Anyways, you should get ready. I'll meet you in the dining room."

"Ri...g...ht."

It was not long after Harry made his way into the kitchen and helped Misses Crawft set the table that Lisa came walking in looking much more refreshed. She gave Harry a grateful smile that caused a most unusual feeling to well up in his chest. It felt like a hummingbird were beating its wings in his chest. Lisa's books often called the feeling 'butterflies'.

Harry ignored the feeling as he had done every other time he felt it recently, and sat down next to her just as Lisa's parents came in, Misses Crawft with plates of pancakes and Mister Crawft with a cup of coffee and the morning newspaper.

Breakfast that day was not nearly as bad and dreary as it was the last time Harry was set to leave for Hogwarts. He and Lisa managed to keep up light banter without needing to force the conversation, his friend was even laughing and giving him genuine smiles instead of those watery I-might-cry-at-any-second smiles he had received from her last year. It seemed like she had grown accustomed to him being away for several months.

Harry was not sure that was a good thing, but felt that so long as his friend was hurting less it couldn't be bad.

The morning was made even better because not only did Mister Crawft simply pretend he did not exist, which was a right sight better than the man's usual baleful glare, the bank manager also had to get to work early.

With his new found thoughts on girl's, Harry was actually beginning to wonder if Mister Crawft was just being one of those 'overprotective father' types some of Lisa's stories contained. It actually made a lot of sense in retrospect. Lisa was a very cute girl as he could most certainly attest to. While it was still a year off for most people, other boys would no doubt begin noticing her in the same way Harry had.

That still didn't explain why Lisa's father was being rude to him though. This had been going on ever since they had turned ten. It wasn't like Harry had even thought of Lisa in any capacity other than a best friend until this summer.

Maybe all father's just became overprotective of their daughters once they reached a certain age?

Time past very quickly and before long, Harry found himself feeling a sense of deja vu as he stood in front of the door leading outside with Lisa standing in front of him.

"Well... this is it..."

"Yeah..."

Harry wondered if it was the curse of all people leaving the ones they cared about to have no clue as to what they should say. You would think that after already having gone through this once, he would have been able to think of something, but no, words just seemed to fail him.

Fortunately, Lisa was not at a loss for words.

"I expect you to send me a letter at least once a week."

Harry cracked a grin as Lisa crossed her arms under her chest and gave him an imperious glare that left no room for argument. Leave it to his friend that the first thing she would say to his leaving was a demand for letters. For some reason, it made him feel better that she could still remain herself this time instead of looking like she was about to break down and cry.

"I will."

It was not unexpected when Lisa hugged him. He knew it was coming, yet it did not diminish the thrill he felt when she pressed her body against his. He really was beginning to enjoy the feel of Lisa pressing herself against him while he held her in his arms.

Gods be damned hormones.

"You'd better," Lisa mumbled in his ear before taking a step back and giving him a smile. She definitely looked better than their last goodbye. Harry did not even see her tear ducts beginning to form water.

As Harry stared at his friend, a strange impulse came over him, one he acted on before his brain caught up with him and told him he should not do what he was about to do. Leaning forward ever so slightly, Harry pressed his lips against his friend's cheek, enjoying the momentary contact of her skin on his lips. At least, until he realized what he had done and reared his head back as if he had been struck in the face by a stinging hex.

Harry stared at his friend in horror, all the blood draining from his face as the opposite happened with Lisa and blood began rushing to her cheeks. The blush that began as two small dots on her cheeks soon spread to the rest of her face, all the way up to her scalp and then down her neck. It would not surprise him if it even extended well past her chest.

"Uh..." Smoother words had never been spoken. As Harry tried to get his brain to reboot without success, Lisa raised a hand to the cheek he had just kissed.

"H-Harry?"

The words jolted Harry into action, an action he would forever be ashamed of until the day he died.

Harry Potter ran away.

"Gotta go! I'll see you later, Lise!"

"Hey! Wait! Harry!"

And with that, Harry ran out the door and onto the street. Because of this, he missed Misses Crawft's 'aw, how cute!', however, he mostly certainly did not miss Lisa's shout of 'MUM!' right before disappearing with a slight crack.

Hormones, they truly were the bane of his existence.

XoX

Harry's apparition point was one that he had planned a week in advance. Now that he knew where King's Cross was, it was very easy to just apparate there. Apparition required not only clear knowledge on where something was geographically located, but also a clear image that could be conjured within one's mind in order to create the 'wormhole' as Harry had taken to calling it, from one point to another.

His apparition point in this instance was a small restroom stall that he had placed a muggle repelling charm around the last time he had been at King's Cross. He had used enough magic to make it last a few days. Any

non magical human who went near it would suddenly remember they had something better to do than use the stall he had chosen.

His appearance was nowhere near as silent as it usually was this time, such was the haste in which he had apparated. The crack was loud enough that one of the people using the urinals several feet from the affected area of his repelling charm yelped in surprise at the sound and spun around, spraying urine all over the floor.

"God dammit! Shit!"

Harry ignored the swearing as he stepped out of the stall he had apparated into. He was about to begin heading for the door when the man who had been using the urinal stopped him.

"Eh? What are you doing here, kid? I don't remember —"

Before the man could go any further, Harry waved a hand in front of his face. The face of the man who was wearing a gray business suit went slack jawed and his eyes glazed over.

"You will forget you ever saw me here."

"I will forget I ever saw you here," the dazed man repeated in a droning voice that reminded Harry of Professor Binns.

"You will also inform someone that you had a bit of an accident in the restroom and it needs to be cleaned up."

"I will inform someone that I made a mess and it needs to be cleaned up."

Harry nodded his head, then turned around. He paused, however, then turned back around and waved his hand one more time on impulse.

"By the way, these are not the droids you're looking for."

"These are not the droids I'm looking for."

Satisfied and feeling more than a bit amused, Harry left the restroom and

stepped into the busy walkway of King's Cross station. Despite how crowded the station was, with people moving to and fro in every direction and leaving very few gaps in between where someone could slip through, the raven haired youth still managed to seamlessly work his way into the flow of traffic and begin walking towards his destination.

It did not take him very long to reach the small gateway that led to platform nine and three-quarters. Harry used his unnatural grace and cat-like agility and reflexes to deftly swerve and side step incoming people as he moved ever closer to the gateway that was illusioned to look like a wall. He walked directly over to the wall, prepared for the tingling sensation as the magic washed over him...

...And then walked right into it.

Into it. Not through it.

"What the...?" Harry blinked in confusion several times as he looked at the wall before him. He pressed his hands against the brick and gave it a firm push. Nothing. His hands did not slip through the wall like it was made of some kind of quicksilver. He was not allowed passage through to the other side of the gateway... because the gateway was apparently no longer there. Harry couldn't even feel the small tingle in the back of his neck that signified a place that was heavily saturated in some kind of magic.

Harry ignored the strange looks he got from a few of the people around him as he turned around and pressed his back against the wall. He slid down it until he was sitting, then crossed his legs underneath him and began to think.

Reviewing the past few seconds in his mind, Harry determined that, for whatever the reason, the magic that opened the gateway to platform nine and three-quarters was gone. Or maybe it was blocked. But then, if that were the case, whoever or whatever was blocking the gateway had to be incredibly strong. The magic around this place had been awfully powerful.

But why would someone that strong want to block the gateway in the first place? What purpose would that serve?

"Harry Potter must not go back to Hogwarts. He must stay where it is safe. He is too great, too good, to lose. If Harry Potter goes back to Hogwarts, he will be in mortal danger."

Harry immediately remembered the small house elf's words several nights ago. His eyes narrowed in thought as he recalled the words spoken that night. He had not been able to learn much about the plot, namely because the house elf, Dobby he had called himself, had taken to bashing his head against something every time Harry asked him to extrapolate on the 'terrible plot to make bad things happen at Hogwarts'.

While Harry had not learned anything of use besides there being some type of evil plot that would be unleashed at Hogwarts this year, he had been able to determine that the house elf's family, or someone in his family, was the one who had concocted this plan. He had also determined through common sense that this person was likely a Death Eater, if only because Dobby had inadvertently implied that Voldemort was indirectly involved.

Unfortunately, that still left him with nothing to really go off of. There were a large number of Death Eaters who had escaped punishment. Two hundred in total. Most of them were just fodder, purebloods who had nothing to their name and would never be the Head of their families, but a good number were powerful pureblood Lords on the Wizengamot. Even if he were inclined to accuse them, doing so, especially without evidence, would be foolish.

The only thing Harry felt was certain of was that whoever was creating this plot was not one of the Death Eaters who had a child at Hogwarts. As callous as they were, he did not think they would be willing to risk their own heirs to complete their master's plan, especially when, as far as they knew, Voldemort was dead.

Sighing, Harry stood up. There was nothing he could do about the plot going on at Hogwarts, and even if this was in some way tied to that plot, there was little he could do about whoever had closed the gate.

What he needed to do was find a way to get to Hogwarts on his own, or maybe catch up to the Hogwarts Express. It was unfortunate that Hedwig

was traveling to Hogwarts on her own. He could have really used her to send a message to Professor McGonagall to inform her of what happened.

Well, there was nothing for it. He had to do this on his own. It was just another challenge on his road to becoming the greatest wizard to ever live.

XoX

"Where the bloody hell is Harry!?"

"Language, Tracey!"

"Ugh... right, sorry. I'm just..."

"I understand that you're worried about Harry," Lisa added before Hermione could make another comment. "We all are. But there's not much we can do about that, you know."

"I know."

"In any event, if we knew where Harry was, don't you think one of us would have probably told you by now?"

"...What is this? Gang up on Tracey day?"

"That's every day."

"Oh can it, Lisa."

Daphne frowned as she let the comments from her compartment companions wash over. She did not partake in the conversation, if only because she had nothing informative to add. Instead, she simply stared out the window, watching as green pastures, hills and forests rolled across her vision.

Like last year, Daphne had woken up at the same time as always, and after saying goodbye to her sister, she and her father headed to Platform nine and three-quarters. She had been hoping to meet Harry there so

they could find a compartment together, but her hopes had been dashed when Harry did not show up. At first she had thought he might have already found a compartment, but when she got on the Hogwarts Express and did a search, she found him conspicuously absent.

"So what do you think happened to him?"

"I don't know. It isn't like Harry to be late for something like this. I simply can't imagine him missing the Hogwarts Express."

"Maybe he ran into a troll on his way to King's Cross?"

"Not funny, Tracey."

...

"Right, sorry. Hey, Daph. Do you think something may have happened to Harry?"

Daphne sighed as she turned her attention to the other three people in the compartment with her. Because Harry was the only one who knew the expansion charm and he was not with them, they had been unable to all fit in the same compartment, thus they had been forced to split up. Sitting with her was Tracey, Lisa and Hermione. She knew that Terry, Blaise and Neville had gotten their own compartment while Susan and Hannah had gone to find their fellow first year Hufflepuff's to sit with.

"I honestly don't have any idea. And I can assure you that if I did, I would not be here." If she knew where Harry was, she would have been with him instead.

Of course, if she knew where Harry was it meant he would have been on the Hogwarts Express and chances were all of them would be sitting together.

Daphne frowned for a moment as the thought crossed her mind that Harry might be in danger, but she quickly shook the thought off. The only person who would have the audacity to do anything to Harry was the Dark Lord, and he was currently a spirit without a body. The chances of them running into each other was slim to none.

"In any case, I doubt Harry's in any kind of danger. He's more than capable of taking care of himself. Most likely there was just something that came up that caused him to miss the train. I suspect he'll send a letter to Professor McGonagall or someone and they'll go pick him up. We'll probably see him at the opening feast or tomorrow at the latest."

Tracey sighed.

"Yeah, I guess you're right. Still, I was hoping we'd all be able to sit together in a big group like last time."

Daphne shrugged. The truth was she didn't really like being with all those people. Oh, they weren't bad people or anything. She just wasn't fond of large crowds. Perhaps it was because of how she was raised in a large house with only Astoria as company, but Daphne often preferred solitude to being with a group of people.

"Can't help you there."

As Tracey gave a dejected sigh and turned around to talk to Lisa and Hermione, Daphne looked back out the window.

Her friend bringing up Harry had her thinking about him now. Contrary to her words to Tracey, Daphne was a bit worried for him. Harry was a very punctual individual, and she could not imagine him missing the Hogwarts Express for anything short of some kind of disaster. She could only hope he was alright.

Thinking about Harry also made Daphne think of the last time they saw each other, of that moment within the Leaky Cauldron when everyone else had left.

Despite her training, a small dusting of red spread across her cheeks and the bridge of her nose as she remembered how Harry had almost kissed her. Even now she could remember the half-lidded expression of desire on his face as he began leaning down to close the distance between them. That scene had played out in more than a few dreams since then.

A part of her wondered what would have happened if she had not said anything. Would he have really kissed her? What would being kissed by

Harry feel like?

"I want you to get close to him, Daphne."

Daphne shut her eyes tightly as her father's words suddenly rang in her head.

"I want you to be the one he is closest to. If possible, make him fall in love with you."

She had never believed she could hate her own father as much as she did when he said those words. It sickened her to think that he wanted to use her relationship with Harry for his own benefit. Daphne had been so mad that the mask of cold indifference she often wore actually cracked.

"Even if I decide not to let him marry you, I want you to be the person he trusts and cherishes most. You will do this, Daphne, or you will be reeducated."

Daphne did not know if the shiver that passed through her was in fear or rage. It may have even been both.

There was no denying that her father was a sick man. The punishment he had given Astoria for coming with her when he had called for Daphne only was proof of his depravity. Even still, she could not help but think this was an all time low for the man who she shared blood with.

She sighed. There wasn't much she could do about any of this. As much as she wished it were otherwise, Daphne was powerless to do anything against her father.

The compartment door slid open. Daphne and the others turned their heads to see Draco Malfoy, his two goons Crabbe and Goyle, and Pansy Parkinson walk in.

"Well, well, well," Malfoy drawled as he looked at the four of them, his sneer of superiority turning into one of disgust when he laid his eyes on Hermione. "Look who we have here; the Greengrass heiress, the dirty little half-blood, some nerdy Ravenclaw and the disgusting mudblood."

Hermione gasped at Malfoy's use of the most derogatory term you could call a muggleborn. Meanwhile, Tracey flinched at the mentioning of her blood status and Lisa bristled at being stereotyped. Daphne kept her cold eyes locked on Malfoy, not showing a single hint of emotion.

It was amusing to see the boy direct his gaze away from her stare. Malfoy was such a coward. It was the reason her father refused to allow a marriage contract between them, which was the only thing Daphne had ever been grateful to her father for.

"I think it might be best if you leave," Lisa stated boldly as she wrapped an arm around a teary faced Hermione's shoulder.

"No," Malfoy smirked, "I don't think we will." He turned to Daphne again, his bravado back in place. "How can you stand to spend any time with these... inferior breeds?"

Daphne said nothing. There was no point in responding to the taunts of a fool like Malfoy. And besides, not saying anything would annoy the boy far more than if she actually said something.

"Look at how far the House of Greengrass has fallen," Pansy said in her shrill, annoying voice. Daphne had never liked Pansy, the sycophantic girl who looked like she had been cross bred with a pug. "Hanging around with mudbloods and half-bloods. You sure have fallen far, *Daphne*."

Daphne did not bother responding to the girl's taunt. Pansy was not worth her time.

She did, however, finger the wand now hidden in her left sleeve.

"I think you might be looking in a mirror," Tracey chimed in, having finally gotten over her discomfort. Daphne's friend had always been disheartened by her blood status, not because she disliked it, but because what it had meant for her in regards to society.

Had Tracey been a pureblood, her father would have let the girl visit them, since she was not, he had refused to let Daphne to see her and the only way they had been able to talk was through letters.

"How dare you mock me!" Pansy screeched. "Filthy little mudblood lover! I think you need to be taught a lesson in manners!"

"Couldn't agree more," Malfoy leered. "Crabbe, Goyle, why don't you help show these girl's why pureblood's are superior to mudbloods and blood traitors."

Daphne narrowed her eyes at the insult as Crabbe and Goyle cracked their knuckles and walked forward. She waited until the two were close enough that there was no way she could miss before acting.

Standing up quicker than anyone else had likely expected, Daphne whipped her wand from her sleeve and pointed it at the one closest to her. Goyle.

"Maldemer!"

A bright light shot from the tip of Daphne's wand and struck Goyle directly in the chest. The gorilla looking pureblood stared at her stupidly for nearly a second before the spell took effect, sending the boy to his knees as he began vomiting all over the floor.

"Goyle!"

The boy's equally stupid partner looked over at his friend in shock with the others. He then turned to Daphne who had just pointed her wand at him.

"You!"

As he surged forward, Daphne's eyes widened in panic. The boy moved much faster than she thought he would have been capable of, given how large he was. Still, she opened her mouth to launch a curse at him. The blistering curse. She had thought about using the castration hex, but Daphne was not cruel enough to do that to anyone unless they truly deserved it.

Before the words could get out of her mouth, Crabbe was already swinging one of his meaty fists at her.

A cry of pain escaped her lips as the fist impacted against her face. Her pain receptors cried out as lights filled her vision.

She tried to shake her head and will the pain away, but before she could, Crabbe grabbed her by the hair and yanked her up, adding to the pain she was already feeling. Tears leaked from the corner of her eyes as the feeling of her hair being ripped from her scalp set her nerve endings on fire.

"Daphne!?" Tracey screamed in shock at seeing her friend being manhandled. While Tracey was gaping, Hermione was moved into action. She stood up and pulled out her wand, pointing it at Crabbe.

"Petrificus Totalus!"

Crabbe's body suddenly stiffened. His hand let go of Daphne's hair, allowing her to stumble back into the compartment window, and snapped to his side. For one second all was still. Then Crabbe fell backwards, hitting the ground with a meaty thud.

"Filthy mudblood!" Malfoy spat as he pulled out his own wand. "I'm going to teach you a lesson on —"

Draco Malfoy did not get to finish his sentence because at that exact moment the compartment door was slammed open.

Everyone turned around to see the person who had entered and gasped. There, standing in the doorway, his killing curse green eyes actually glowing like someone had cast a lumos behind them was none other than Harry Potter.

And he was pissed.

XoX

There were few times in recent years that Harry could remember being angry. The most recent two being when his friends had attacked that troll while he was trying to come up with some kind of plan to defeat it, and the other being when Ron Weasley rudely asked him if he remembered the night his parents died.

Yet even in those moments, the anger he felt then was absolutely nothing compared to what he felt at the sight before him. Daphne Greengrass was on the ground, tears in her eyes and a large bruise forming just off the side of her left eye. On his hands and knees beside her, dry heaving as he leaned over a pile of his own vomit was Goyle — his friend's handiwork no doubt — and in front of Daphne, laying stiff as a board was Crabbe. Tracey was standing up and looked ready about to cry, Hermione had her wand out and Lisa looked completely confused and afraid.

Then there were the other two, Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson. Parkinson he didn't care for. She was just a follower. Malfoy was the ring leader here.

He watched with a grim smile as the two idiots that were still capable of standing and dared to attack his friends pale at the sight of him. His enhanced nose could practically smell the fear they were beginning to radiate.

That was good.

A nearly invisible wave of his hand conjured a modified silencing barrier. There was no need to let anyone in the other compartments know what he was doing.

"Potter —" Malfoy tried to speak, but Harry would not give him the chance. Before the blond boy could finish his sentence, Harry was moving.

A wave of his hand in Pansy's direction conjured a set of ropes that quickly and efficiently bound the girl tight enough that she gave a sharp yelp of pain. The foolish girl was then sent crashing to the ground as she lost her balance.

Malfoy's eyes widened more. He made to point his wand at Harry, but by that point in time Harry was already within his guard.

Slapping Malfoy's arm to the side, Harry let the wand move up and over his shoulder as he closed the distance between them. There were so many moves he could make up close like this. Perhaps he should grab

the boy's shoulders and slam his knee into the fools gut? Or maybe he should take the arrogant sod by the head and smash the idiots face against his knee? That one did sound awfully satisfying.

But no. He had a few things to say, and Malfoy wouldn't hear them if he was busy crying in pain. Plus, Harry wanted to see the fear in the boy's eyes as he realized how big a mistake he made when he attacked Harry's friends.

Grabbing the boy by the collar of his robes, Harry spun around and slammed Malfoy against the wall. The boy's yelp of pain was stopped early by a choked gasp as Harry gripped his neck with one hand and squeezed. Enhancing his body with magic, Harry lifted the child into the air.

The way Malfoy's eyes bulged from their sockets in fear was incredibly satisfying.

"It seems I have been too lenient with you, Malfoy," Harry's voice came out as a sibilant hiss that had Malfoy shuddering in fear. "Do you remember what I told you would happen if you hurt my friends again?" The fool in his grasp opened his mouth to respond, but only a rasping gurgle came out as Harry's fingers squeezed his neck harder. "I told you that if you ever went near my friends again, I would hunt you down and bring you such suffering that Voldemort himself would piss his robes in fear."

"Well, guess what?" Harry's smile was as cold as it was feral. He smelled urine as Draco Malfoy pissed himself. "You get to find out that I always make good on my threats."

Malfoy's strangled cry of pain was drowned out by the sound of lightning crackling as Harry conjured purple electricity to his hands. Arcs of electrical discharge coursed from Harry's fingertips into the blond boy in his grasp, lighting nerve endings aflame and causing what Harry hoped was indescribable amounts of pain.

Soon, the smell of charred flesh began to permeate the room as Draco Malfoy's skin began to burn. Small, red blisters appeared on his skin. The hair on his scalp began to blacken and crisp, turning to ash and falling away from his head. Soon, the boy was bald and the skin on top of his

head began to blister as it too was burned.

"Harry! Stop it!"

Hermione's voice filtered through his ears. Harry blinked as he came back from his rage. He looked up at Draco, who looked like his skin was about to start blistering and blinked once more as lightning charged through his body like a thunder storm.

The lightning stopped as Harry let go of Draco Malfoy, allowing the boy to drop down the ground with a pained moan. He was still alive, and would be fine in a few hours provided someone fix up those burns and give him a potion to help deal with the pain.

Harry turned around. Everyone flinched when his eyes landed on them. Their faces looked at him in fear, their eyes wide and frightened at the terrible act he had just committed. They were afraid, afraid of him, of what he had done.

Harry felt sick.

"Here."

Hermione flinched as Harry turned to her, but instinctively caught the bottle and the vial he had thrown at her.

"The bottle contains a healing salve for burns and the vial contains a potion that will deaden nerve endings to stop someone from feeling any pain. Use them on Malfoy."

Spinning around, Harry left the compartment, pushing past his frightened and shocked friends, who moved out of the way like the red sea parting as he ran past them.

He needed to be alone right now. He needed to think. Most importantly, he needed to be away from his friends. Harry would not admit to it, but the looks of fear they had given him hurt worse than any curse, and he did not think he could bear the sight of them looking at him in fear any longer.

I would like to thank everyone again for reviewing this story. Last chapter received 167 reviews, which, by the way, is totally awesome.

You know the drill by now. Do not forget to check out my blog: Thoughts and Wonderings of a Fanfiction Writer. The link is on my profile.

Friends

Chapter 11: Friends

Harry stared listlessly out of the window, his eyes taking in and memorizing the sight outside while his mind was locked onto what had happened in the compartment with Daphne, Hermione, Lisa and Tracey just a few minutes ago. The incident that not only those four had seen, but all of his friends outside the compartment had seen as well.

It had been a long time since he had lost control like that. Not since he had truly started working on his martial arts with Master Wei had he gotten so irrepressibly angry to the point where he not only felt violence was the best solution to his problem, but also relished in the violence itself and the fear it inspired in the one he was committing said violence upon.

A part of Harry would have liked to blame it on his hormones. It would be very easy to do. Hormones led to an increase in testosterone, which often resulted in males acting more rashly than they usually did. When such chemical factors are involved, it was all too easy to take the most brash and violent course of action. Yes, he could easily place the blame on hormones if he wanted.

But he wouldn't. Master Wei had taught him that the only way you could grow was to take responsibility for your own actions. People who could not admit to making a mistake could not grow into their full potential and would be forever stagnating under their own ignorance and unwillingness to improve themselves.

That was the reason Harry had made his odd form of peace with the Dursleys. Even if he would never consider them family, or even like them, he had wronged them in the same way they had wronged him. An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind, or so the old saying goes. Thus, Harry decided to be the bigger man and make his peace with the people he was forced to live with.

He liked to think it helped him grow as a person.

Thinking back on that moment in the compartment with Draco not to long ago caused Harry to wonder how he could have handled that better. There must have been something else he could have done to solve the situation with less violence. He could have easily just stunned the boy and his lackeys and tossed them out.

But when he had seen the looks on his friends faces, the tears in Tracey's and Hermione's eyes, the helpless look on Lisa's face and the large bruise on the left side of Daphne's face he had just lost it. In that moment all he had wanted to do was make Draco Malfoy pay for hurting his friends, for daring to even think he could hurt his friends without suffering from the consequences. He had wanted the boy to suffer.

For a second, rage consumed Harry's mind at the thought of what Malfoy and his companions had done to his friends. It only lasted for a second, however, and when it left, Harry just felt tired. An exhaustion that had not been there before filled his being, mentally and emotionally draining him. It felt like that single moment of adrenaline that comes when he's sparring had kick started his system only to leave prematurely.

Harry had made a mistake, and as much as he would have liked to blame Malfoy or hormones or even both, he knew that the fault was with him. And unfortunately, he did not know how to fix this particular mistake. He did not know how he could go up to his friends and apologize for scaring them.

How could he, when he wasn't even sure he could look them in the face without feeling shame?

Fortunately, he wouldn't have to.

The door slid open and the sound of multiple feet hitting the floor reached his ears. Harry looked up, blinking as he watched several people enter his compartment. Only his Occlumency training kept him from gaping in surprise.

"What are you doing, sitting in here all alone?" asked Tracey, placing her hands on her hips as she looked at the dumb struck boy with her usual

devil-may-care grin. It was a tad bit forced, but it was still there. "Why don't you hurry up and expand this compartment so the rest of us can fit in here too?"

"The rest of you?" Harry blinked as he looked from Tracey to Daphne to Hermione, then to all the people standing outside of the doorway; Lisa, Terry, Neville, Blaise, Hannah and Susan. He looked back at Tracey, his expression clearly still expressing his shock. "You guys still want to sit with me?"

Daphne sniffed derisively.

"Obviously," she drawled with a bit of sarcasm, a touch of reproach and a hint of warmth. "Why wouldn't we still want to sit with you?"

"Well, you know, because..."

"Because you put that arrogant prick in his place?" asked Tracey, interrupting Harry before he could say anything else.

"Tracey..." Hermione groaned, causing the young brunette to look sheepish.

"Right... sorry."

Daphne sighed and shook her head at her friend.

"I'm not even going to say it."

"Oh hush up, Daph."

Harry bit his lip. It was a gesture that was so out of character most people would have wondered if he wasn't some kind of imposter who had polyjuiced himself as Harry. He had picked up this particular expression from Lisa Crawft.

"So you guys aren't afraid of me after... after what happened back there?" He knew they had been afraid of what he did back there. Harry had seen the fear in their eyes. Even Daphne had flinched when he looked at her. He was sure they would not have wanted anything to do with them after

witnessing how violent he could be.

"Well, it was kind of scary," Lisa admitted, biting her thumb. "I mean, seeing all that stuff you did to Malfoy, it was really scary." Harry winced. "But I don't think you would do something like what you did to Malfoy to us. I don't think we have anything to fear from you."

Harry perked up a bit. He didn't want to get too hopeful, but, well, it was a bit hard not to be. For all his ambition, intelligence and maturity, Harry was still just a twelve year old boy.

Even if he refused to admit it.

"And... all of you feel this way?"

Surprisingly, it was Susan who stepped forward. She managed to squeeze herself into the compartment and moved over to sit next to Harry. It was a very bold move for Susan, who was perpetually shy thanks to her inferiority complex.

"Do you remember at my Aunt's house, when you spoke with me about how I shouldn't worry about living up to my Aunt's name?" Harry nodded, wondering where this was going. "You helped me so much back then." Susan blushed, but doggedly continued speaking before she could lose her nerve. "Your words made me realize I was trying to live up to my Aunt's reputation instead of trying to be my own person. You helped me so much, and I don't think you truly realize how much those words meant to me. How could I ever be afraid of someone who has helped me so much?"

Harry stared at the girl in mild astonishment. Out of all the people here, he had assumed she would have been one of the people who would have feared him the most after his display. Yet here she was, telling him that she did not fear him for what he did.

He had really underestimated Susan. He vowed not to do so again.

"And... and I'm not the only person you've helped either..." By now, Susan's face had grown quite red. It was clear she was beginning to lose what confidence she had. Thankfully, there were other people capable of

stepping in and speaking up in her place.

"All last year you helped me out," Neville could not fit into the nearly filled up compartment so he had to stand by the door. "My grades are only as good as they are because you helped me with my homework and spellwork. I feel better about myself than I ever have before because you've been helping me become someone I can be proud of. You even helped me with Malfoy last year, just like you helped protect Daphne, Hermione, Lisa and Tracey today."

"You saved me from that troll last year," Hermione added. "I would have been dead if you hadn't been there. You didn't have to save me, but you did anyways, and you ended up getting terribly injured because of it."

"I could talk about how you saved us all from the Dark Lord," Hannah added from where she stood behind Neville. "But thinking about what happened at the end of last year still gives me the chills."

"As it should," Blaise added. He looked over at Harry. "I wasn't even there when it happened, but I remember watching as you were laid out on a hospital bed. It wasn't a pretty sight."

"And don't forget," Tracey added with a grin. "You bought me a new broom. That right there makes you the most awesome person I know."

Hermione sighed.

"We all try to give Harry proper encouragement and what do you do? Mention the broom he bought you for Christmas."

Daphne shook her head.

"Smooth, Trace. Real smooth."

"Ugh," Tracey's shoulder slumped dejectedly. "Hush up, both of you."

"I don't really have much to add," Terry shrugged his shoulders as if the say 'sorry' when everybody looked at him. "But I don't really think I need to. You're pretty much the reason we're all here. If you hadn't shown up, I doubt any of us would have become friends. We would have probably

stuck with the people in our own House, rather than try to branch out and make friends in other Houses."

As each of Harry's friends gave him their support, Harry's eyes locked onto Daphne. The girl had not spoken since her sarcastic remark, but the look she was giving him was more than enough. It was the same look he had seen that day after they had gone shopping for school supplies, that expression of warmth where the ice chips that made up her eyes seemed to melt and allow her true self to appear from beneath her icy demeanor. Where that soft smile on her utterly kissable lips made his knees feel slightly weak.

Harry concluded that it was a very good think he was sitting down.

"Thanks guys."

Harry wiped at the suspicious moisture that had built up around his eyes. He wasn't crying. It was simply the air had a strange mixture of scents that his enhanced nose could not handle because of all the different kinds of soaps, shampoos and perfumes his friends were using and it was causing his eyes to water. Sort of like how the scent of garlic causes the eyes to water.

Nope, he was not crying at all.

And if he was, which he wasn't, it was simply because the hormone chemical otherwise known as testosterone that was invading his body was making him act up.

He decided to conveniently '*forget*' that testosterone generally tended to make people more inclined towards violence and acts of stupidity than emotional acts like crying.

Sometimes, Harry really hated having eidetic memory.

XoX

Conversation flowed and laughter bubbled forth from the lips of the people within the now magically expanded compartment.

"I saw one of the new Nimbus 2001s in the Quality Quidditch Supplies shop a while ago," Tracey was telling Terry. "It's the most gorgeous broom I have ever seen; pure black finish, sleek, aerodynamic design, and it's speed is amazing! Did you know the 2001 reaches a top speed of 250 kilometers per hour? I'm telling you, all Quidditch teams will be using the Nimbus 2001 in a few years."

"But hows it's maneuverability?" asked Terry. "Surely the broom will lack the ability to make sharp turns with that kind of speed."

"Well, there was a recent article on the new 2001 that said it lacked the ability to make sharp turns due to the amount of wind resistance riders face against at top speeds. But I was told that all Nimbus 2001's come with a wind nullifying charms, which is supposed to actually cut through wind resistance to allow for harder turns and more maneuverability."

As always, Tracey and Terry were talking Quidditch. Or brooms. This time it was brooms. Sitting beside Tracey was Hermione, who was looking incredibly amused and shaking her head at the conversation.

"Those two," she sighed.

"I know what you mean," Lisa giggled into her hand. She was sitting next to Hermione, with Neville sitting on her other side, taking up the window seat as he spoke with Blaise. "It's like Quidditch and brooms are the only things they can talk about." She paused, then added, "That, or they argue."

"Well, Terry could probably discuss astronomical events as well," Hermione said, "but I don't think Tracey would care for that."

"No, she definitely wouldn't."

"One of the newer plants in my Greenhouse is actually a Chinese Chomping Cabbage," this came from, of course, Neville, who was holding a conversation with Blaise about some of the plants his grandmother, Augusta Longbottom got him.

Blaise nodded.

"I hear those are used in a lot of potions we're going to learn in our fifth year. I do know that Skele-gro uses Chinese Chomping Cabbage as one of it's main ingredients." Blaise let out a shudder of disgust. "Nasty stuff that. I had to take some once when I was younger. My leg had been broken beyond repair they said, and that I would have to have all the bones vanished and regrown. It was the foulest potion I have ever had."

As his friends conversed all around him, Harry looked over to his right. Susan was sitting there, with Hannah on her other side. They were talking about something interesting that had happened to Hannah's mother two days ago.

Well, Hannah was talking. Susan was just listening with a small smile on her face.

"And then she tripped over her own feet and started giggling and singing! I swear, I've never seen mum get so sloshed before!" Hannah giggled for a good minute before settling down enough to continue. "Though, I can't blame her. That was some really good wine. It was the stuff dad let us try when we went to that vineyard in California, remember?"

Susan smiled and nodded.

"I do."

Turning his head to the left and looking down, Harry saw his hand resting on the seat at his side. He also looked at the hand whose fingers were partially covering his own. It was a very feminine hand, dainty, and one that he could say he was intimately familiar with now.

Harry followed the hand up the arm, shoulders, neck and then to the gorgeous face of one Daphne Greengrass. After the compartment was expanded and everyone sat down, the blond haired, blue eyed Slytherin had claimed his left side. Tracey had complained a bit, stating that she had sat next to him last train ride and that she should give someone else a turn.

Daphne had sarcastically stated that she had decided to take up permanent residency there and if Tracey had a problem she could take it up with her.

Needless to say, the brunette had decided to not argue and only made a few minor grumbles about the 'unfairness of it all'.

He was surprised no one had made any comments about the physical contact between their hands. It was very discreet, for physical contact that is, but it wasn't like Daphne was making any attempt at hiding how their hands were touching. He was sure Blaise had noticed. Tracey had also looked over from time to time, her brows furrowed like there was something she was puzzled about. Susan had most definitely noticed; he saw her eyes flicker over to his and Daphne's intimately touching hands and blush. The others though, seemed to be lost in their own conversation to have spotted it.

He also wondered why she was being so... touchy. He wasn't really complaining. The soft yet intimate contact felt nice. He just didn't think Daphne was the type to enjoy physical affection of any kind. At least not in public.

Harry supposed it didn't matter, and thinking about it gave him a headache, so he quickly put the thought out of his mind and just decided to enjoy it.

There were some things the male mind was just not meant to know.

As he looked at his friend, Harry also took note that the large bruise on her face was still there. It had turned into an ugly, purple spot that was beginning to swell. He knew it was feeling sore to, as Daphne occasionally grimaced in pain every few seconds.

"Daphne?"

"Hmm?"

Startled from whatever she was thinking, Daphne turned her head to look at Harry.

"Is something wrong?"

"I was just wondering how you were feeling," Harry asked, nodding at her bruise. "That looks like it hurts."

"This?" Daphne reached up and gingerly touched two fingers to the bruise. She hissed, and quickly jerked her fingers away. "Yes, it does hurt a bit."

"Here, let me see if I can't do anything to help with that," saying this, Harry followed words with actions as he turned his body more towards her. He lifted his free hand up to her face and gently cupped the side of her face with the purpling bruise on it.

Daphne's hiss of pain lasted only for a second before the magic in Harry's hand started taking effect. Gentle tendrils of green magic flowed from his hand into the bruise, which began to fade more and more quickly as the seconds passed. Eyes closing and body relaxing, Daphne pressed her face against his hand and released a barely noticeable sigh as the healing magic flowed through her.

"There," Harry said softly, mostly to himself. He removed his hand from Daphne, who seemed strangely disappointed. Her eyes fluttered open again and she blinked several times as she realized the pain was now gone. "Feel better?"

"Yes," Daphne seemed surprised. Harry smiled.

"How did you that?"

Blinking, Harry turned to see that he had become the center of attention in the compartment. It was with a start that he realized he had acted without thinking of the consequences, namely, everyone seeing him do wandless magic.

"Do what?" Harry tried to play innocent. He knew the moment Hermione scowled at him that it wasn't working.

"Don't 'do what?' me, Harry Potter. How did you manage to perform a wandless healing charm like that?"

Harry sighed. There was no way to get out of this. And he didn't really feel like lying to his friends. He was already lying to Lisa and it tore him apart every time he had to do so again.

Gods he hated the Statute of Secrecy.

Besides that, Harry trusted them. These people had proven that they would stick by him through thick and thin, even when faced up against the likes of trolls, Dark Lords and bullies.

Maybe that was why he was allowing himself to be so careless around them? Harry could have easily used one of his potions. He kept a number of them on him at all times, having learned his lesson from the amount of injuries he had suffered last year that it was better to be safe than sorry. Yet he didn't. He had used wandless magic instead.

Perhaps this was his subconscious' way of informing him that he should open up a bit more? The mind was a very unusual thing, so Harry did not discount that theory.

"It's not a wandless healing charm," Harry admitted. Hermione opened her mouth, likely to make some angry exclamation about how he was lying to her, but he held out a hand to stop her. "It is wandless magic, but what I did was not actually a spell."

"Then what was it?" asked Lisa, as someone whose mother worked at Saint Mungos, she was probably interested in learning what he did more than the others. Though both Susan and Daphne looked interested as well. Even Tracey was leaning forward in her seat.

"To start, you all know how children perform accidental magic, right?" asked Harry. It was a rhetorical question. "Accidental magic is magic performed by a child when they are experiencing strong emotions or as an act of self defense. This is, or was, essentially the same thing."

"What do you mean?" Lisa pressed.

"When I was younger, I used to get hurt a lot," Harry informed them. He did not mention that the reason he got hurt was because of his Uncle and cousin beating him, or Master Wei beating him when the old Chinese Martial Arts master started to teach him. "However, the next day, all of my injuries would be healed as if they had never happened. Cuts would be mended, broken bones reset, all after a good nights rest. so... I did some experimenting."

"Experimenting?" asked Hermione, her eyes shining with barely masked curiosity.

"Hmm," Harry nodded. "I'm sure most of you remember the cases of accidental magic you've had. You've probably done some unusual things like levitating objects, changing people's hair color and the like."

Everyone nodded. "Well, I had that happen to me as well, a lot. For as long as I could remember, in fact. When I realized this, I knew that all the things happening around me were somehow being caused by me. So, I began experimenting. I tried to replicate those feats by reproducing the emotions I felt when those things happened. After much trial and error, I was successful."

To emphasize his point, Harry pointed at his trunk sitting overhead. The locks clicked and whirled until the lock had the number '2' on it. The trunk opened and *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2* flew out of it and landed in his hands.

Everyone stared at him in shock.

"Once I managed to figure out how to replicate one case of accidental magic, the rest came to me much more easily."

Everyone gawked at him, even those who were trained not to show emotions. Hermione was the worst of them.

"Wha...? But? How? Huh?"

Harry nodded his head. "That's how I thought you'd react."

XoX

Everyone got over the knowledge of Harry being capable of casting wandless magic (and the fact that he had been doing so for years now) pretty quickly. To them, it was just another one of those strange quirks that made Harry who he was. Granted, wandless magic was pretty impressive and all of his friends felt a good deal of shock and curiosity.

Hermione was probably the most excited, as she had taken to asking him all kinds of questions about how he first learned to cast wandlessly and if

it would be possible for her to replicate the feat.

Naturally, he had told her that, yes, she could probably replicate such a feat, but it would likely take years if not decades before she could properly do wandless magic. Even then, she might not be capable of it depending on her mindset.

Very few witches or wizards could actually use wandless magic from what Harry had observed.

He wondered if his friends would have still been so impressed if they learned that the only reason he had been able to create wandless magic through recreating accidental magic was because he had eidetic memory.

Maybe, maybe not. Who knows?

Conversation started up again as people shifted gears. Harry took this time to wonder about what had happened to Malfoy. He had left the boy in a pretty bad state, though, assuming Hermione and the others had applied the potions and salve all but the boys lost hair had likely been returned to him by now. His wounds, while bad, had not been horrible. Just a good number of second degree burns. An easy fix.

It was strange, while Harry regretted his friends witnessing what he had done to Draco Malfoy, he did not regret what he had done, just that his friends had seen it. He wondered, did that make him a bad person?

"Harry?"

"Yes?" Harry looked up to see Tracey staring at him with an inscrutable look.

"How did you get onto the Hogwarts Express without us seeing you?" she asked. Harry blinked at the randomness of the question. "I mean, we looked all throughout the train for you, but you weren't there. Now you've just shown up out of the blue like you appeared here magically or something."

"Ah..." Harry felt a bit sheepish when Hannah gave him a mild glare and

Susan held a look of slight reproach on her face. "There's a funny story behind that..."

XoX

It wasn't until well after I was flying alongside the Hogwarts Express that I begun to realize this wasn't a good idea.

After discovering that the barrier to platform nine and three-quarters was sealed off somehow, I decided that I needed to find a way to get to Hogwarts on my own. I would have sent a message, but, well, I didn't actually think I would be needing to and so I had sent Hedwig on ahead.

That was a mistake on my part, I'll admit.

I soon realized there was really only one way to get to Hogwarts and that was to follow the Hogwarts Express.

Of course, the Hogwarts Express is a magically enhanced steam train and is capable of exceeding 160 kilometers per hour. I would need something that was even faster if I wanted to catch up to the Hogwarts Express, which, according to my internal clock, left about fifteen minutes ago.

I frowned. A part of me wondered if staying as long as I had with Lisa contributed to my missing the Hogwarts Express. Had I left early, would the gates still have sealed shut on me?

I disregarded the notion as pointless. I did not regret staying with Lisa until the last minute then, nor would I do so now.

Fortunately, I did have a way of catching up with the Hogwarts Express. My broom. My brand new Nimbus 2001, to be precise.

Knowing that I couldn't just pull out my broom from my trunk and fly out of King's Cross, I made my way out of the station and into an abandoned alley. After casting all of the appropriate charms to keep people who might stray inside away, I unshrunk my trunk and pulled out my broom.

I had also thought about pulling out my cloak, but decided not to. I didn't

want it to get blown off while I was flying.

First, I cast a disillusionment charm over my broom. It vanished before my eyes, but I could still feel it in my hands, and since my hands have not moved I could imagine the broom's placement relative to myself and the ground within my mind. I then cast a disillusionment charm on myself. With both myself and my broom invisible, I mounted the broom and took off into the air.

Which is how I found myself flying over the Hogwarts Express at speeds exceeding 160 Kilometers per hour, my butt feeling like I've been rubbing sandpaper against it despite the cushioning charms installed on the broom.

Really, what I had been thinking? I hadn't honestly expected to be capable of flying all the way to Hogwarts, did I?

I don't answer my own question, mainly because I don't want to know.

I hoped I wasn't losing brain cells or something.

Well, if I was I suppose I could just blame it on puberty.

Deciding that I had already come this far and might as well add one more set of stupid actions to my already growing list of idiotic and hash brained actions undertaken within the past several minutes, I jerked my broom around and pushed down so that I was running alongside the train and could peer into the windows.

I could see a lot of old faces of people I knew, which was pretty redundant because the only faces I could not put a name to were those who were starting their first year at Hogwarts. Yet none of the faces I had seen so far were the ones I was seeking. I needed to find someone I knew personally.

Namely, I needed to find my friends.

I easily deduced that they would likely have split up into separate compartments. Without me there to cast the expansion charm, they would not be able to sit together.

I made a mental note to teach at least one of my friends the expansion charm. Just in case.

Fortunately, I managed to find two familiar faces a few seconds later. Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones were sitting together in a compartment with Ernie Macmillan and Justin Finch-Fletchly. The two boys were sitting on one side, while the girls sat opposite them.

With the sound of the engine and the wind vying for attention in my ears, I nudged my broom carefully until I was flying so close to the Hogwarts Express that my shoulder was almost rubbing against the train.

Then, I dropped the disillusionment charm and knocked on the window.

XoX

"So," Daphne was the one who broke the silence, her voice somehow managed to sound both dry and reproachful at the same time. Harry had to admit, he was impressed. "You mean to tell me that after the magical barrier around platform nine and three-quarters became inexplicably inaccessible, you decided to fly all the way to Hogwarts, before realizing that it would not be a very comfortable flight, and so, you decided to come aboard the Hogwarts Express through a window while it was *still moving*. Is that about right?"

Harry managed not to wince.

"That's exactly what he did," Hannah affirmed before Harry could even begin to speak, glowering at him.

Not that he actually knew what to say. How could someone even begin justifying something like this?

"Frightened Susan and I half to death, he did."

"That has to be the dumbest thing you've ever done," Tracey was very succinct in her thoughts.

"Well," Harry mumbled somewhat petulantly. He knew he had not made the smartest choice, but that didn't mean they had to point it out. "Ernie

and Justin thought it was cool."

"Of course they thought it was cool!" Hannah exploded, still sounding very angry. It was one of the few times she actually sounded angry. She was normally such a happy girl, Harry lamented. "They're boys. They're going to think doing something as stupid as hopping into a moving train from a broom is the coolest thing ever."

"It does sound pretty cool, I have to admit," Blaise muttered, his face thoughtful. "Though I honestly wouldn't have expected you of all people to do something so reckless."

"Especially after you got onto us about being reckless last year during the troll incident," Terry added with a smirk. This time, Harry could not quite contain his wince. While he knew they would not have forgot something as life changing as that, he had not expected it to be used as ammunition against him.

Perhaps this was karma.

"Alright, so what I did wasn't the smartest action I have ever undertaken."

"Understatement of the century," Hermione muttered. Harry rolled his eyes.

"However, I don't regret doing it," the raven haired youth continued as if Hermione had not said anything. "Had I not got onto the Hogwarts Express, Malfoy and his ilk would have done more than just leave a bruise on Daphne's face." At this, everyone went silent. "They could have seriously hurt you guys, and I would have never forgiven myself if something like that happened when I could have prevented it. If doing something reckless will allow me to protect my friends, then I would gladly commit such acts every day."

It was not something Harry often vocalized because he felt it ruined his image, but he had always had a bit of a protective streak. Before now, it had only been with Lisa Crawft. Whenever his friend was being picked on, Harry was always there to get rid of those people, through force if necessary. Whenever his friend was injured, be it physically or emotionally, Harry was there to take away the pain.

He would admit, in some ways he had not been a very good friend to Lisa when they were younger. He had never complimented her, never initiated any physical contact unless it was poking or pinching to get her attention, and he had always been a little short with her when he felt she had done something stupid.

Yet, when something happened to upset his friend, he would always be there to try and solve it. He might not always be able to help, sometimes he only exacerbated his friends problems because he just hadn't been able to understand her emotional outbursts (logic rarely helps solve emotional problems), but he always tried. It was, in a way, his way of showing he cared because he had not really been able to express himself any other way.

That time had come to an end. It had started with meeting Hannah and Susan on the Hogwarts Express, and ended after the troll incident. He still had trouble expressing himself sometimes, he still tended to err on the side of logic instead of emotion, but he was getting there. He was different. Harry had changed.

He had to admit, it wasn't a bad change, all things considered.

Everyone in the compartment became silent at Harry's declaration, their eyes slightly wide and a few mouths (namely Tracey's) were agape. Daphne's hand slid completely over his, her finger's threading through the gaps between his as she squeezed his hand.

"Geez, that's really deep stuff," Tracey sighed. "And it takes away all my fun." She cast a mild glare at Harry. "How am I supposed to have fun messing with you if you're going to say crap like that?"

"Tracey..."

"Ah... right, um, sorry."

XoX

When the Hogwarts Express finally came to a stop within Hogsmeade, everyone had already managed to get dressed in their school robes and were ready to disembark just a few seconds after arriving at their

destination.

Despite all odds, the group of ten managed to stick together as they traveled through the large throng of students that tried to push and shove their way out of the Hogwarts Express. By contrast, Harry and his friends made sure to calmly walk out so they wouldn't get separated.

As Harry took his first steps outside, his booted feet hitting the cement of the platform for the train, the young Potter heir inhaled deeply of the cool night air. Unlike London or even Surrey, the air at Hogsmeade and Hogwarts was always crisp and fresh.

"Firs' years! Firs' years over here!"

Hagrid's large form could be seen towering over the students. Harry's lips twitched when he observed some of the first year students reactions to the monstrosly sized man. It was pretty amusing to see a few of them actually take a few steps back in fright. Granted, Hagrid could be pretty frightening to most at first sight.

"Alright," Tracey declared as the group arrived at the carriages. Harry watched as other people got on their own carriages and moved off while his group stood back a ways for the moment due to Tracey stopping them. "We've got to figure out whose going to sit with who... and I call dibs for sitting with Harry."

Hannah and Susan both frowned. So did Lisa, but her's wasn't quite as prominent.

"You got to sit with Harry last time," the blond Hufflepuff stated, crossing her arms under her chest. Harry noticed that she, like some of the others, was beginning to develop. "That means it's someone else's turn to sit with him."

Thus began the debate on who would be sitting next to Harry. It turned out Hannah, Lisa, Susan and Tracey all wanted to sit next to him, though only Hannah and Tracey were seemed to be arguing; Lisa just sort of glanced at the two girls with a small frown while Susan would look like she wanted to speak up occasionally, only to lose her nerve at the last minute.

While this was going on, the others were staring at the at the four girls in fascination.

"Are they really fighting about who get's to sit with Harry?" asked Neville as he stared dumbstruck at the four.

"Looks like it," Terry said.

"Why?"

"Who knows," Blaise shook his head. "There could be any number of reasons, and I for one do not wish to find out what those reasons are. Sometimes, it's just better to not know."

"Like that old saying 'ignorance is a bliss'?" Hermione asked. She was not participating in the great 'who get's to sit with Harry Potter' debate. Really, she didn't see much of a reason for it. The whole thing was pointless.

"Something like that."

Standing beside Harry, also watching the debate with a sort of twisted fascination, Daphne Greengrass shook her head at the group of girl.

"Idiots," she muttered, right before she grabbed Harry's hand and began to pull him along behind her. "Come on. Let them debate this matter on their own. Perhaps they'll eventually realize their argument is pointless if you're not here any longer."

Harry looked back at the group. Susan was the only one who noticed him being dragged off by Daphne. Her eyes widened and she tried to get Hannah's attention by pulling on the sleeves of Hannah's robes. It didn't work. Hannah just shook her off and got back to arguing with Tracey.

"I think that might be a good idea," Harry admitted.

"Of course it's a good idea," Daphne replied blandly. "I'm the one who came up with it."

XoX

Susan frowned as Hannah continued ignoring her in favor of arguing with Tracey.

"Look, all I'm saying is that I should be the one to sit with Harry," her friend was telling the brunette Slytherin. "You've spent a lot more time with him than I have. It's only fair that I get to sit with him this time."

"I never said you couldn't," Tracey rolled her eyes. "I was simply saying that I'll be the one sitting 'next' to Harry." The way she emphasized the word next made it very clear to Susan what she was talking about.

Normally, such a implication would make her blush. Scratch that. It did make her blush. However, this time, Susan tried to push past her embarrassment and get her friends attention.

"Hannah."

"And why should you get to sit next to Harry?" Hannah huffed. "You've gotten to sit next to him a lot. You've even forced me to scoot over so you could sit in between us."

Susan frowned as she glanced back towards the area where Harry and the others were. Daphne was still pulling Harry after her, and Hermione and the three boys were following. She frowned and tried to get her friends attention again.

"Hannah."

"So? That just means you're not being... assertive enough," Tracey grinned.

"Does it really matter who gets to sit right next to Harry anyways?" asked Lisa. "I don't really think it would make much of a difference."

Tracey and Hannah looked at their raven haired friend aghast.

"What are you talking about?" said Tracey. "Of course it matters!"

"But why? It's not like you can't talk to him without sitting next to him." Lisa hummed thoughtfully. "It may actually be better not to sit next to him."

You would have to turn around to face him and it might be too crowded in those carriages to do that."

A pout began to cross Susan's face. Why was no one paying attention to her? Were they really so caught up in their argument that they couldn't even be bothered to listen to what she had to say? This was important!

"Hannah!"

Still not receiving an answer, she glanced over towards their other friends to see Daphne pull Harry into a carriage, Hermione and the others following a second later. Wow, they actually managed to fit all six of them into one carriage. She would have been impressed if it didn't mean her friend's reason for arguing was now moot.

She looked back at Hannah, Lisa and Tracey, her frown growing as they continued to ignore her.

Ok, now she was actually getting annoyed.

"That's difference between you and me," Tracey told Lisa. "You just want to talk history with him."

Lisa rolled her eyes.

"And what would you do if you got to sit next to him?"

Tracey blushed.

"Well I'd —"

"HANNAH!"

Silence descended upon the three girls. As one, the trio turned to look at Susan, whose face had gone as red as her hair. Had she really just shouted that loudly? How embarrassing.

If her throat were capable of making noise, she probably would have only been able to emit a squeak as she suddenly became the center of attention. More than ever, Susan was beginning to wish she had just kept

her mouth shut. Barring that, she was tempted to crawl into a whole so she could die from her embarrassment in peace.

"Damn that was loud," Tracey said, wincing. "I think you popped my ears."

"What's wrong, Sue?" Hannah ignored Tracey's words in favor of her best friend.

Susan plucked up what little courage she had that had yet to vacate her. Thankfully, she was able to use her talk with Harry during the summer at her house to bolster her flagging confidence and actually speak before losing what was left of her nerve.

"Harry left."

Even more thankfully, she only needed to say two words to get her point across.

...

"What!?" Two girls exclaimed while a third looked around to see that, yes, Harry really did leave.

"So did the others," Lisa noted with a sigh. "Daphne and Hermione aren't here either. They probably went off with Harry and got a carriage without us."

Hannah pouted at her friend.

"Why didn't you tell me Harry had already left."

"I tried to," Susan mumbled lowly, "but you weren't listening."

"Ah... " Hannah's cheeks flushed pink. "I'm sorry, Sue. I should have paid more attention.

"It's alright," Susan said, forgiving as always even though she did not like the fact that she had been ignored.

"Well this just sucks," Tracey growled, then sighed. "Ugh, come on. Let's get a carriage and get on. No sense in staying here."

Everyone agreed that it would be pointless to stick around when the reason for their argument was now gone.

As the four girls began walking towards the carriage, Susan heard Tracey mutter, "Damn those two, sneaking off with Harry like that. Wait until I catch up to them. I'm going to give them a piece of my mind."

Susan wondered if she should inform Tracey that it was her fault she did not get to sit by Harry due to all the arguing she did with Hannah, but decided not to. She may have gotten a bit more courageous recently, but she wasn't *that* brave yet.

Maybe by the end of the year.

But not now.

XoX

"Maybe it was bit rude of us to leave them like that," Hermione murmured as the six of them sat in a single carriage. It was a bit cramped, she was squished in between Blaise and Neville while on the opposite side Harry sat in the middle of Daphne and Terry. Thankfully, none of them were very big so they could all fit in the carriage, albeit barely.

Daphne sniffed derisively from where she was carefully leaning against Harry. Only he seemed to notice that she was sitting closer to him than was necessary. There was actually a space of several inches between her and the outer wall.

What did this mean?

"It was rude of them to argue, and they were taking too much time anyways."

"I blame Tracey for that," Blaise said, running a hand through his very short hair. "That girl is always arguing with someone."

"I'm surprised she didn't argue with Terry," Neville added slyly. Everyone knew he was making an implication about how Terry and Tracey almost always argued when they were together.

"Why would I argue about not wanting to sit with Harry?" Terry frowned. "No offense, mate" he added to Harry, "you're a decent bloke and all, but I don't really care who I sit next to on a carriage."

"None taken," Harry responded in a dry tone. "And I think he was mentioning how neither you nor Tracey argued the entire time we were on the Hogwarts Express, not about who would get to sit next to me."

At Neville's nod of confirmation, Terry flushed a bit.

"Ah, well," he coughed into his hand, clearly using it as a diversionary tactic so people wouldn't see him blush. It didn't work. "That's mainly because we didn't really talk about anything other than the new Nimbus 2001 before you started telling us how you caught up to the Hogwarts Express. Awesome story, by the way. Wish I could have seen it."

"Well thank you," Harry said good naturedly. "I'm glad someone appreciates my flare for the dramatics." He really wasn't. While Harry could put on a good show, as proven when he was playing Quidditch, it wasn't in his nature to act with added flare for dramatic effect. But there was no need to tell anyone else that.

"Boys," Daphne and Hermione both sighed out at the same time, then blinked. They looked at each other, sharing in this small moment of female camaraderie. It was a first for them.

"Men," Blaise corrected, causing Daphne to roll her eyes while Hermione just shook her head.

The carriage soon stopped and the group found themselves standing outside the front gates to Hogwarts soon enough. Several students passed them by on their way inside, a few pointing out the large group, or more likely Harry who was still being held up as a celebrity in the wizarding world. The group ignored them for the most part, though a few of the older students like Cedric Diggory and Titus Button (one of the few Slytherins aside from Blaise, Daphne and Tracey who was actually

friendly to him) were greeted with a wave.

Eventually, Hannah, Lisa, Tracey and Susan walked up to them after their own carriage dropped them off. Tracey was glaring at her friends. The others looked a bit put out too.

"Not cool, Daph," Tracey said, trying for a scowl that came out more like a petulant pout. "Dragging Harry off and leaving me like that. So not cool."

"Then you shouldn't have been arguing so much," Daphne gave Tracey a smile that could only be considered sarcastic and condescending. "Since you four were wasting time, I decided to get you moving by taking Harry out of the equation for you. That way, you wouldn't have anyone to argue over."

"I still don't get why they were arguing in the first place," Neville muttered. In response, he received a pat on the shoulder from Blaise.

"Listen to someone who is speaking from experience," the dark skinned pureblood said. "There are some places the male mind is just not meant to go. The female mind is one of those places."

Harry shook his head at the boys words. Still, he did agree with them. The female mind was a frightening place.

A shiver escaped him as he remembered the one and only time he had ever met Jeanette.

A very frightening place indeed.

XoX

The Great Hall looked just as magnificent as Harry remembered, though it did lose some points on originality. Like last time, thousands of candles were hovering in mid air over the tables, casting their luminescence and reflecting off the gleaming surface's of the golden goblets and plates that sat upon them. Seeing the same set up as last year made Harry wonder if they ever changed the decoration for the start-of-term feast.

Probably not.

"We'll see you guys later, alright?" said Tracey.

"Yeah," Hannah waved at the trio of Slytherins. "See you tomorrow."

Still standing close to him, Daphne gave Harry's hand one last squeeze before following her Slytherin companions to their table. Susan and Hannah followed suit, making their way to the Hufflepuff table and Terry and Lisa went to their own Houses table. That left Harry, Hermione and Neville to walk to the Gryffindor table on their own.

"Good evening, you three," greeted a beaming Nearly Headless Nick. Harry greeted the Gryffindor House ghost along with Hermione and Neville, though his mind was decidedly not focused on the conversation that Nicholas was trying to engage them in.

No, his mind was currently focused on Daphne. He had noticed from the moment the group had sat down in the compartment on the Hogwarts Express that his friend had been a lot more affectionate than she usually was.

Granted, saying she was more affectionate was bit of an overstatement. It wasn't like she was trying to seduce him like Selene had or using him as a giant teddy bear as Lisa often did. Still, the difference between now and last year was startling, for him at least.

Absently, Harry found himself looking at the hand that Daphne had taken to touching when they had been sitting down, not just in the compartment but in the carriage as well. It was like she had some kind of new need or desire to be in physical contact with him in some way, shape or form. He wondered, was this due to how their last meeting during their shopping trip in Diagon Alley had ended? Perhaps she too had wanted to see what would have happened if he had actually kissed her?

Did that mean she liked him as more than a friend?

And if so, what should he do about it?

"It looks like they're starting," Hermione's voice startled Harry out of his

thoughts. He looked up to see the doors to the Great Hall open and all of the first years walk in.

Harry took a moment to observe the first years, committing each face to memory and making a few judgments for all of them based on their posture, walk and bearing. It wasn't long before he decided that most of the first years this year would be sheep. There were only a few to note that seemed to stand out and Harry made sure to catalog every detail he saw about them.

Those ones, he would be sure to keep an eye on.

As the first years lined up and stood nervously waiting to be sorted, Professor McGonagall set down the same stool that Harry and his friends had used when they were sorted and placed the Sorting hat upon it. It was then that Harry noticed something that was missing from the scene.

To be more precise, *someone* who was missing.

"Where's Snape?"

"Professor Snape," Hermione corrected. Harry contained his snort, but just barely. "And he left a few seconds ago." Harry blinked. He had not seen the man leave, then again, he had not been facing the teacher's table or the Great Hall doors either. It wasn't like he could have heard the man leaving in the previous ruckus around him, enhanced hearing or not.

"I don't see Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, or Parkinson either," Neville added, causing Harry and Hermione to look over at the Slytherin table and realize he was right, they were not there. "Snape's probably gone to find them."

"A logical conclusion," Harry said. "Though they should have been capable of walking down here on their own by now." He turned to Hermione. "You guys did heal his burns right?"

"Of course," Hermione frowned, as if insulted by the idea that she would just leave Malfoy to his injuries. "When we left, all of Malfoy's burns were healed. The only thing he was missing was his hair." Her lips thinned. "You know that when Professor Snape finds them, Malfoy's going to rat

you out and you'll get into trouble?"

"I don't doubt it," Harry said simply.

The conversation soon ceased as the Sorting Hat began to sing. It was a different song than last year, Harry noted, but it still held the same theme. It spoke of the four houses, what each of the Founder's looked for when selecting students to be in their House. Really, the only difference was the words themselves.

Then the Sorting began in earnest. Harry watched as Professor McGonagall called each student up and placed the hat on their head. Gryffindor ended up getting a good number of students, including Ginny Weasley, the young red headed girl he had first seen during his first ever ride to Hogwarts.

She was one of the ones Harry would watch out for, if for no other reason than her brothers, Fred and George, were rather extraordinary pranksters.

As the Sorting Ceremony came to a close and Professor McGonagall took the hat and stool away, Headmaster Dumbledore stood up and opened his arms wide in a gesture of welcome.

"I would like to welcome you all to another year at Hogwarts!" The aging wizard's voice boomed across the hall. "And I would like to welcome those who are just starting to their first year here! I hope that all of you will come to enjoy the wonders and mysteries this school has to offer, and to those who are coming back, I hope that the summer has emptied your head's properly so that it may be filled with more knowledge!"

A small chorus of groans erupted from a few people at the mention of learning more. In particular, the Weasley twins. They were being far more loud in their voiced displeasure about gaining knowledge than anyone else.

Harry shook his head in minor bemusement. Why some people wouldn't want to learn magic was beyond him.

Then again, this was the Weasley twins he was thinking about.

"Before we begin the start-of-term feast, I would like to thank Mister Gilderoy Lockhart for agreeing to take up the position as Professor for Defense Against the Dark Arts!"

At his words, Lockhart stood up and gave everyone a jaunty wave, a grin, and a wink. A good number of people clapped, mostly muggleborns and female's. Several of the girls actually swooned, including Hermione.

Harry sighed to himself. How someone so intelligent couldn't see the man for what he was after that debacle at Flourish and Blotts was beyond him.

And now!" Dumbledore began once more. "I wish for all of you to enjoy the start-of-term feast that has been prepared for us! Tuck in!"

With that, Headmaster Dumbledore clapped his hands and food appeared on the plates and pumpkin juice in the goblets that were situated at every table.

The feast began as it had the last time. Harry took a little bit of everything, deciding it would be alright if he did not eat healthy for this occasion. Conversation between himself, Hermione and Neville was expanded to include the rest of the second year students. Dean spoke of how his favorite Football teams were doing, which eventually led to a minor argument between him and Seamus about the merits of Football vs. Quidditch. Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown gossiped about the latest fashion, which had Hermione wrinkling her nose. Fay Dunbar was mostly quiet, but Harry tried to include her in the conversation as well.

Suddenly, a bright flash nearly blinded Harry and his friends. Blinking, the raven haired second year looked over to where the flash originated to see a young boy with mousy hair, large eyes that made him look like some kind of puppy and a scrunched up face, clutching a camera in his hands and staring at him like he was the sole center of the universe. It was a look he had seen on some of the girl's who stared at him when they thought he wasn't looking.

This freaked him out far more than anything Jeanette could have done or said. At least she was a very attractive female.

"You're Harry Potter!" The boy, Collin Creevey was his name, said. "I

know all about you. Everyone's told me. About how you survived when You-Know-Who tried to kill you and how he disappeared and everything and how you've still got a lightning scar on your forehead."

Harry watched as the boy's eyes flickered to the scar on his forehead. By now he was used to people doing this, so it didn't bother him much. Still, this kid kind of creeped him out. He reminded Harry of those fangirls. Only he was a boy, which made it worse.

"And on the train a boy said if I develop the film in the right potion, the pictures'll move."

Colin drew a great shuddering breath of excitement, as if he couldn't quite contain himself. Harry felt like shuddering in fear.

"It's amazing here, isn't it? I never knew all the odd stuff I could do was magic till I got the letter from Hogwarts. My dad's a milkman, he couldn't believe it either. So I'm taking loads of pictures to send home to him. And it'd be really good if I had one of you" — he looked imploringly at Harry — "maybe one of your friends could take it and I could stand next to you? And then, could you sign it?"

"Erm..."

Harry found himself at a bit of a loss. Despite being something of an iconic figure in the Wizarding World, no one had ever asked for an autographed photo before. Most people were content to watch him from a distance and whisper behind his back.

What to do, what to do. He could let this boy take a photo and sign it, but that would be annoying as it might give other people ideas. Not only that, but while he might use his own fame to promote himself politically, he had no desire to be like Lockhart.

He decided to go the diplomatic route.

"Maybe a later. You know, like after we get settled down in the Common Room or something."

"Oh, ok Harry," Collin seemed very disappointed. He looked almost like a

kicked puppy.

Fortunately, he was a male and therefore the whole 'kicked puppy' look did not affect Harry.

Now, if he were female and as cute as Lisa Crawft, things might be different.

"Looks like you've got another fan," Neville commented in a slightly teasing tone. Harry grimaced.

"Not cool, Nev," Harry decided to take a page from Tracey as far as lingo went. He also decided that if he was mimicking Tracey there was some kind of problem with him. Hopefully, no one else would notice.

"Please don't start cursing," Hermione started, "one Tracey is bad enough." Well crap. "I don't need to deal with another one like her."

Harry rolled his eyes. That comment didn't even deserve a response. That, and he was actually a tad embarrassed that he used the same lingo as someone like his foot-in-her-mouth friend.

Just then the large, double doors to the Great Hall creaked open and in stormed Severus Snape. The hook nosed, shallow looking man with the greasy hair looked positively livid as he made a bee-line for the Gryffindor table.

"Uh oh," Neville mumbled, "looks like trouble."

Harry couldn't help but agree.

"Potter!" Snape snarled as tried to grab Harry by the arm and yank him to his feet.

Key word being tried. The moment he actually made a grab for him, Harry smacked the hand away. Snape, who was not expecting such an act, actually looked surprise.

"Hello, Professor," Harry gave himself a pat on the back for keeping the condescension from his tone. "Can I help you?"

The Great Hall had gone quiet. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see Professor McGonagall and the Headmaster coming down from the teacher's table.

Snape recovered quickly and he snarled again.

"You're in trouble now, Potter! Assaulting students before the school even begins! I'll have you expelled!"

"I hope you have a good reason for threatening one of my Lion's, Severus," Professor McGonagall's severe voice entered the conversation as she and the Headmaster walked up to them.

By now, everyone in the Great Hall was silently watching the drama that was happening before them. Harry could see that many were curious and wondering. A good deal were whispering to their friends and motioning to the scene unfolding around him.

Snape drew in a deep breath, visibly calming down. Harry surmised the man was using Occlumency meditation to clear his mind like Harry himself often did.

"I have a very good reason for this, Minerva," Snape sneered, "Today on the Hogwarts Express, Mister Potter assaulted and physically harmed Vincent Crabbe, Gregory Goyle, Pansy Parkinson and Draco Malfoy. Draco in particular was injured greatly."

Both professor McGonagall and Headmaster Dumbledore turned to look at Harry.

"Is this true, Mister Potter?"

"In a manner of speaking," Harry admitted, "However, if we are intending to press charges on me for assault, then we will also need to press charges on the students that Professor Snape mentioned, as they were already assaulting my friends and had harmed Daphne Greengrass. I was only defending my friends from the violence Malfoy and his ilk unleashed on them."

"A likely story," Snape said, turning to the Headmaster, "I found Draco

Malfoy and the others still on the train when I went looking for them. According to Mister Malfoy, Harry had assaulted them and used some kind of spell to burn him. All of Malfoy's hair was gone, corroborating his story."

"And yet he had no burn marks on him," Harry said. He didn't know if that was one hundred percent true, but since Hermione said she had used the potions and paste to heal the boy, and as Snape had not mentioned the burns, he felt it was safe to assume they had healed perfectly.

As they should have. That potion had been one of the few that used his new synthesized Elixir of Life that he had created using alchemy to increase its effectiveness. While not as good as the Elixir of Life created by the Philosopher's Stone (his Elixir of Life did not offer immortality nor could it return someone to perfect health from near death), it was incredibly effective in healing antidotes of all kinds.

Though he should probably come up with a new name. It may have been based off the Elixir of Life, but it was not really the same thing.

Snape scowled.

"That hardly matters," he said dismissively, "I have three eye witness accounts that you assaulted and harmed your fellow students —"

"And I have nine eye witness accounts that I was merely defending my friends from being harmed by my fellow students," Harry interrupted. The sneer on Snape's face became an enraged snarl. "I can also get Daphne Greengrass' testimony for you. Perhaps we could even send a letter to her father, Lord Greengrass, and inform him that the son of Lucius Malfoy assaulted his prized daughter."

Harry knew when Snape stiffened that he had said the right thing. Nathaniel Greengrass did not care for Daphne as a person, but he did care about her as an asset. Any damage done to her was damage done to the personal property of Lord Greengrass. He would not take someone damaging his most prized political tool that he had been training for the past several years lightly.

"I do not think there is any need to involve Lord Greengrass in this mess,"

Professor Dumbledore finally decided to step in, his voice and demeanor holding the same grandfatherly tone as always. "Clearly, what happened here was simply a misunderstanding gone too far. I believe it would be best if we let bygones be bygones in this instance."

Snape gaped.

"Surely you can't be suggesting that we let this go!?" His voice raised in pitch. "I demand this boy be punished for what he's done, and I am sure Lord Malfoy will feel the same when I inform him of what happened."

"Lord Malfoy will not have any choice on the matter," Harry declared boldly. "Get him involved and I will demand my right as the heir to one of the Founding Five Families to authorize the use of veritaserum on Draco Malfoy and his cohorts to confirm my story."

Snape's nostril's flared as his face turned a shade of puce that would have put any facial coloration Vernon Dursley ever produced to shame. The man looked ready to spit fire.

"Now, now," once more, Professor Dumbledore was the one acting in a conciliatory fashion. "There is no need for that. I have already come up with a solution that should be suitable. Harry, because you did actually assault a student and have freely admitted it, you will be getting a weeks worth of detention with Professor Snape —"

"Detention!" Snape nearly bellowed. "After what he did you want to give him a mere weeks worth of detention!?"

"Severus!" professor McGonagall shouted. "Mind yourself!"

Snape scowled at his Gryffindor counterpart.

"And what of Draco?" asked Harry mildly.

"Because Draco and his friends assaulted a student as well, they will be serving a weeks worth of detention with Professor Lockhart."

Harry nodded. "That sounds reasonable." Sure, detention with Snape would be bad. No doubt the man would have him do the most demeaning

tasks and keep him there as long as he reasonably could. But, honestly, that might actually be preferable to serving detention with Lockhart. Who knew what that man would make him do.

Probably help him sign autographs or something equally dull.

Several feet away, still sitting at the teacher's table, Gilderoy Lockhart sneezed.

Once again, I would like to thank everyone who reviewed. 169 reviews is incredibly awesome. Because of you guys I almost have 2,000 reviews and I'm only on chapter 11. seriously, you guys are incredible.

You know the drill by now. Let me know what you like about this chapter, what you don't like, what you would like to see in the future. If you have an idea for what you want to see in this story, don't be afraid to put it down. If I like it, and can reasonably add it without changing my plot, I will try to add it in my future chapters.

Also, if you have any questions, or want to see questions other reviewers asked being answered, make sure you check out my blog. That's where the answers will be. The link is on my profile page.

Day One

Chapter 12: Day One

I couldn't think of a better place to be right now then standing in that small pub in the Leaky Cauldron with Daphne. We had just finished shopping for school supplies with our friends, and Astoria had left only a few seconds ago. Now we were alone.

Daphne had closed the distance between us until there was only a few inches of space separating her from me. Between the relatively short distance that kept us apart and my enhanced sense of smell, the scent of vanilla and honey was almost too much for me to handle. In that moment, all I wanted to do was wrap my arms around her waist, pull her to me and kiss her with the same passion those characters in Lisa's books kissed.

Gods, help me. I think I'm becoming a pervert.

She had taken my hands in her own. I couldn't help but shiver as a warm jolt of electricity spread from my hands, went up my arms and across my shoulders to travel down the length of my spine. Her hands were so incredibly warm, and soft, and smooth, and maybe my sense of touch was just being hyperactive at the moment, but I couldn't help but think they felt better than even the softest of silk as they gripped my own hands.

"I know you, Harry." As she spoke, I wondered if what I felt was normal. I mean, I was going through puberty true, but I couldn't help but think that what I was going through was a little much for something as simple as puberty. Maybe I was just over thinking things, but I couldn't help but feel that the intense welling of desires I felt were above and beyond more powerful than what most children went through when they started puberty.

This would bear further studying.

My attention returned to Daphne as she continued to speak. "I know you

very well, and I know that you understand and embrace the Slytherin way as much as you do for the other four houses. You don't do anything that doesn't benefit you in some way. Even befriending everyone you know was done for a reason."

Did wizards go through a stronger version of puberty? What would that even be called? Magical puberty?

"I don't think that way anymore, you know," I heard myself say, even though I was hardly paying any attention to what I was saying. Most of my attention was on Daphne's beautiful face, her incredible, baby blue eyes, that small slightly upturned nose, her aristocratic cheekbones, and those glorious looking pink lips.

"I know," Daphne smiled. It really was a beautiful smile. "You may try to be cold and ruthless, and you can be on occasion, but I don't really think that's who you are."

"And who am I?"

"Harry Potter, a good person who's had to grow up faster than most people should and my... someone I care about very much."

That was it. I couldn't take it anymore. Listening to Daphne as she spoke so highly of me and watching that beautiful, princess like face being painted by a lovely pink blush that managed to highlight her gorgeous features was too much for even my impressive self restraint.

Without warning, my hands detached themselves from hers so I could use them. One of my arms slid around her waist, the hand touching the small of her back and pulling her the rest of the way to me. Daphne gasped in surprise, but did not protest my action.

As I pulled the beautiful blond girl against me, the feel of her body conforming to my own was indescribable. I could probably spend hours trying to discover the words necessary to create a proper analogy of how amazing it felt to have this girl's body pressed against me so tightly and still not be able to adequately come up with the appropriate words. I was no poet, and I doubt even they would be able to come up with the proper words to describe how I felt.

My other hand went up to cup her cheek. I allowed my thumb to wander, gently trailing over the soft, silky feeling skin. All the while, my head was leaning down and most of my focus was on her lips.

The first contact was very soft. More of an ephemeral touching of two lips than a true kiss. Still, I reveled in the feel of her lips against mine. They were softer than the most expensive silks and was definitely one of the most pleasant textures I have ever felt.

The second kiss was much better. Daphne seemed to have gotten over her shock and one of her hands had come to grab the back of my head. I could feel her finger's threading through my hair. She used her appendages new position to pull me down further so that our lips were pressed more firmly together.

The rest of the world faded away. The background noise that had been coming from the other patrons in the Leaky Cauldron disappeared. All I could focus on was this extraordinary girl in my arms, whose soft, silken lips were pressed so firmly against my own.

"Harry."

A voice suddenly rang in the distance. For some reason, I couldn't place it. It sounded familiar, sort of like my own voice, but there was a tinge to it that did not belong to me. It sounded almost like there was more than one person speaking.

I ignored the voice. It wasn't important.

"Harry."

Instead I let myself be swept away by the sensations I was feeling from my kiss with Daphne. My tongue traced the outer edges of her lips, silently asking for permission to deepen our kiss. Daphne released a soft whimper of desire that nearly had me losing it right then and there, then she opened her mouth and allowed me to explore her in more depth.

"Harry."

What an annoying voice. Couldn't it see that I was busy? If I ever found

out who was talking to me so insistently while I was kissing Daphne, I was going to go Bruce Lee on them.

My thoughts on using my skills in martial arts to beat up the person that annoying voice belonged to was interrupted when Daphne pulled herself away from me. I was about to ask her what was wrong when, in a voice that was not only not her's but also not female, she spoke.

"Harry. Wake up."

And like that, I woke up.

XoX

"Harry. Harry. Wake up. You alright?"

Opening his eyes, the first thing Harry saw was the blurry outline of a face. A second later his vision cleared and sharpened enough that he could determine who the outline was of.

Neville Longbottom was standing over the bed, a worried look on his face as he tried to shake Harry awake.

"I'm up, Neville," Harry said, only just able to contain his disappointment at being interrupted from his dream. He had been starting to enjoy those dreams.

Sitting up in his bed, he stretched his arms a bit, grimacing as he heard his bones crack. His body had gotten so used to sleeping in his new bed at home that it wasn't acclimated to these four poster beds anymore.

Looking over at Neville, Harry frowned when he saw the boy was fidgeting.

"What's up, Nev?"

"Nothing," Neville said quickly. Too quickly. As Harry gave the boy a look that clearly asked for an explanation, the boy fidgeted some more. "It's just that you were moaning in your sleep. I thought you might be having a nightmare or something."

Ah. Harry nodded his head. That made sense. His friend was worried about him because he was moaning in his sleep.

Wait. What?

"I moan in my sleep?" asked Harry, completely dumbfounded by something his Gryffindor friend said for the first time. Neville nodded.

"Yeah, I woke up early because I thought we were going to start exercising. When I saw that you weren't awake yet, I came over here to wake you and heard you moaning in your sleep. Were you having a nightmare or something?"

Harry didn't know whether to laugh or cry. While he was pleased that his friend didn't know the *real* reason for the noises he had been making, the mere fact that he actually moaned in his sleep and someone had caught him was incredibly embarrassing.

"A nightmare. Yes, I guess you could call it that."

Harry made a note to himself to put up silencing wards around his bed whenever he went to sleep from now on.

"So," Neville fidgeted some more. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Harry waved off his friend's concern. At the same time he discreetly used magic to clean his sheets and boxers. No need to let himself be humiliated further by showing the mess he made.

"And actually, we won't be doing any exercising today," Harry informed his friend. "I still have to write out your work out routine, which I'll do this morning during breakfast." He actually had the schedule in his head, he just hadn't written it down yet. "Did you buy those work out clothes I asked you to?"

"Yeah," Neville gave a nod as Harry climbed out of bed and open his trunk to pull out a towel and the clothing he would wear for the day. "Gran wasn't going to buy them at first, but when I told her what you wanted me to get these for, she was all for it."

"Good," Harry began walking towards the showers, "it's important to wear proper clothing when exercising. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to get washed up."

"Alright, Harry. I'll see you in the Common Room."

After taking a shower and getting dressed, Harry found Neville and Hermione waiting for him in the common room.

"Good morning, Harry," Hermione greeted with a smile. Like always, she had her book bag with her. Also like always, it was currently loaded to the brim with books.

"Morning, Hermione," Harry said as the trio began their long trek towards the Great Hall for breakfast.

The Great Hall was mostly empty when they got there. There were only a few older students that were sitting at the tables. Seventh years mostly, with a small cropping of sixth and fifth years. Harry was pleased to note that not all of them were sitting at their House table, but instead sitting with friends they made in other Houses. It was good to see people were following the trend he set. It meant his plan was working.

After a moments decision, the group went over to the Ravenclaw table where they would wait until the rest of their friends arrived.

Harry smiled as food appeared on the plate he sat in front of; sunnyside up eggs, two pieces of whole wheat toast and a glass of orange juice with a side of Greek Yogurt. It seemed the House Elves had remember his preference for healthy food and decided to go all out this year by making a very nutritious meal on his first day back.

While Harry, Hermione and Neville conversed about what they thought their new classes would be like, Daphne Greengrass came gliding into the Great Hall with all the grace and elegance that was expected of a pure-blood heiress to a Noble House. Being dragged behind the blond haired Slytherin was none other than Tracey Davis, who was stumbling along with all the elegance of a clown that had stepped in mud. And behind the both of them was an amused Blaise.

"Good morning, Harry," Daphne greeted her friend with a quick smile that disappeared as soon as she sat down on his left. Beside her, Tracey flopped herself into her seat with none of the elegance or grace Daphne displayed. As Blaise sat down next to Hermione, the brunette Slytherin's head landed on the table next to her plate with a dull thud.

"So... tired..." she mumbled, looking for all the world like an inferi gone wrong.

Daphne rolled her eyes at her friend's melodrama as she began piling food onto her plate. She stuck with mostly fruits.

"Oh honestly, Tracey. There's no need to be a drama queen. You're not that tired."

"Hush," Tracey lifted her head up just enough to glare at her friend. With the bags under her eyes, it wasn't a very effective glare. "You're the one who decided to drag me out of bed half an hour before we even needed to leave. I'm bloody exhausted."

"Language, Tracey," Hermione murmured absently as she flipped another page to the book she was reading. *Voyages with Vampires*, Harry noted with mild distaste. He hated that book.

"Nggg..."

"You're always so literate in the morning," Daphne said with enough sarcasm to fill her goblet five times over. Tracey did not even respond to her friend's words, busy as she was bemoaning her fate of being woken up far too early for her liking.

"Are you really reading that?" Blaise asked Hermione as he noticed the book she was reading.

"Of course," Hermione said, as if the answer should have been obvious. Which it should have been as she had it in her hand, but Harry knew the question was mostly rhetorical. "I want to get a head start on my lessons, and this story is very fascinating."

It also wasn't true (though Harry also thought it wasn't fascinating either).

Voyages with Vampires did not contain a single line of accurate information on the species aside from their weakness to crosses and silver. Even then, only ghouls and dhampyrs were truly weak against silver. For a pureblood like Selene, all it did was stop their natural healing abilities.

A few minutes later, Lisa and Terry came in, followed shortly after by Hannah and Susan.

"Good morning, everyone!" Hannah said with her usual cheer. Susan gave her own soft greeting as she sat down and began putting food on her plate.

"Hey," Tracey greeted in a tired voice. She was no longer laying her head on the table, but she still looked like death warmed over.

"Are you alright, Tracey?" asked Susan, a concerned look on her face. "You don't look so well." She then quickly added, "not that you look bad or anything. It's just that you look a little under the weather."

"Don't mind her," Daphne commented airily. "She just doesn't like the fact that I took her away from her beauty sleep. Not that it did much good."

"Ugh, what's with you recently," Tracey complained. "Why are you picking on me so much?"

Daphne smirked.

"Because it's easy."

Tracey just moaned in complaint.

"Not cool, Daph. So not cool."

Lisa's lips twitched a bit as she listened to Tracey complain about her friend's teasing. Her eyes soon traveled over to Harry, going from amused to curious as she saw him writing in what looked like a muggle spiral bound notebook.

"What are you writing, Harry?"

"I'm just writing out Neville's exercise routine," Harry informed his friends as they all turned to look at him. "Speaking of which, I just finished."

Harry handed Neville the notebook so he could see what he would be doing each morning. The round faced boy's eyebrows rose higher and higher and his face became increasingly pale.

"You can't be serious!?" Neville sounded horrified, causing the others to perk up even more as they no doubt wondered what could be so terrifying that the boy would sound like that. "There's no way I could do something like this! It's too much!"

Harry took a look at the notepad, looking for all the world like he had no clue why Neville was freaking out.

"Oops," he said with a completely unconvincing smile as he turned the notebook to the first page. "I forgot to flip the page back to the beginning. That's where I expect you to be at the end of this year." He gave the boy the book again. "This is what you'll start out doing. Sorry about that."

Blaise smirked as Neville looked at the notebook again, his face still looking terrified until he saw what he would be doing. Then he just looked slightly frightened.

"I'll bet you are."

"Didn't you mention something about exercising last year?" asked Terry as he ate a forkfull of scrambled eggs. "I think I remember you saying something about that."

"I did," Harry confirmed with a nod. "Neville wanted to join me in my morning work outs, so I decided to make him an actual routine that he can follow this year. Last year all we had him do was stretches because his body was unable to handle the exercises I do."

"That's right," Hannah added, "I remember you saying that!" Her face adopted a look of befuddlement. "But why would you want to exercise? I mean, I get that it's good for you and all that, but witches and wizards like us don't really need to worry about gaining weight or anything. Our magic keeps us healthy."

"Wrong, your magic keeps you thin," Harry corrected. "It doesn't necessarily make one healthy however, and there are several cases where even magic won't keep the pounds off."

His mind absently went to Pomona Sprout and Molly Weasley. Neither of those two witches were what most would consider thin.

"In either event, even though your magic does keep your body healthy to a certain degree, it also making you weaker."

"How so?" asked Hermione, who had finally been drawn from her book due to the topic at hand. She looked positively inquisitive.

"Magic has a very unusual relationship with the bodies of witches and wizards," Harry started, frowning for a moment as he tried to determine how best to word his theory. "Men and women who have a lot of magic generally tend to look and act healthier than they truly are because their magic is keeping them healthy. However, that magic that is making you look good is magic that could be used for something more productive like casting spells and rituals instead of making you seem healthier than you really are."

"So what?" Lisa frowned, "You're saying that some of our magic is being used to keep our bodies healthy when it could be used for more spells?"

"In a sense," Harry rubbed his chin thoughtfully, "but there is much more to it than that. Think of your magic as a well. When a witch or wizard casts a spell, they are drawing from that well. Over time the magic that was used to cast the spell will come back thereby refilling the well and you'll once again be at maximum capacity."

He paused for a moment, allowing his friends to absorb his words.

"Now think of your body as a spell," Harry added, watching as several faces scrunched up in confusion. It was an amusing sight. "Or to be more accurate, a set of spells that are constantly active at all times. For every second that you are alive, your body is pulling some of your magic from that well in order to enhance your body and make it healthier, but also ensuring that you will never be at full strength."

"That... that actually makes a lot of sense when you think about it," Hermione murmured thoughtfully. Out of all those who were listening, she was the most likely to understand the full implications of his words. "It would explain why most witches and wizards always look so thin, and why they can eat as much as they want." The bushy haired witch cast a slightly disgusted glance towards Ronald Weasley, who was stuffing his face with eggs as he spoke with Zacharis Smith at the Hufflepuff table. She turned her attention back to the conversation at hand. "And why they never get non magical sicknesses like the floo or the common cold."

"Yes, it does," Harry nodded, "though there is a lot more involved when it comes to a magical beings immune system. That's a lot more complex than what I'm talking about. In either event, by keeping your body healthy with a combination of the right diet and daily exercise, a good portion of that magic that's going into making you healthy will no longer be needed and you will have a larger well of magic to draw upon."

"Ugh," Tracey grunted in disgust. "Must you talk about your magical jargon so early in the morning? I would like to eat my breakfast in peace."

"Sorry, Trace," Daphne replied dryly, "we forgot you're allergic to learning."

Tracey gave her friend a pout.

"You're so mean, Daph."

"I try."

Harry smiled at his friends antics before the sound of hundreds of flapping wings reached his ears. Looking up, the young raven haired wizard caught sight of what looked like the entire owlery flying into the Great Hall. He noticed with a small smile that almost all of the owls were carrying the Daily Prophet.

It was not difficult to spot Hedwig amongst the large flock of owls. His partner was very distinct, being the only snow white avian in the entire group. She swooped down towards him, a letter attached to her left leg and The Daily Prophet held in her claws.

"Morning, Hedwig," Harry greeted as he stroked the feathers on her head. The white feathered bird preened under his attention. "How are you doing today?"

Hedwig gave a trill of pleasure as her partner worked on one of her favorite petting spots.

"That good, huh?" Harry chuckled as he carefully looked around the Great Hall. A lot of people were beginning to whisper and point in his direction. That meant Andromeda had come through for him. Goody.

"Harry?" Hermione called to get his attention.

"Hmm?"

"Why is everyone staring at you... again?"

"It's probably because of this front page article," Blaise said as he held his own Daily Prophet newspaper. "Listen to this: We at the Daily Prophet have startling news. For over twelve years everyone has been told the story of The-Boy-Who-Lived. For years everyone has read their children books of Harry Potter's exploits. Tales like Harry Potter and the Twilight Princess and Harry Potter and the Warlocks Spell have been some of the best sellers in Magical Britain.

But what if all those stories you've read to your kids, all those tales people have enjoyed so much, were a lie. That's right. A lie. Recent information has been given to this newspaper firm that the many stories telling of Harry Potter's exploits during the years before he made waves at his first year of Hogwarts were nothing more than fanciful tales told by people who didn't know a single thing about Harry Potter.

"I've never done any of those incredible feats mentioned in those stories," one Harry James Potter told the Daily Prophet in an exclusive interview. "In fact, I've never been out of the country before. After the Dark Lord's attack on my parents, I was removed from the magical community and given to my mother's muggle sister to care for me. Until I turned 11, I didn't even know magic was real."

The publishing company that wrote the books, one Molding's Magical

Books, along with several other companies that used Harry Potter's name without his knowledge or consent are being sued for 65% of the profit they made from Harry Potter's name, as well as issuing a public apology.

We at the Daily Prophet are appalled by this misuse of one of Britain's most famous wizards and support Mr. Potter in his endeavor to see justice done in his name." With a deep exhalation of breath, Blaise put the newspaper down and gave the very satisfied looking Harry Potter an intrigued look.

"I love it when a plan comes to fruition," Harry commented with a smile. He had been waiting for this moment for so long and now that it had finally come, he could not help but enjoy it.

"Let me see that," Tracey snatched the newspaper out of Blaise's hand, ignoring the boy's complaints and began looking over the article. Meanwhile, Daphne and Hermione leaned into Harry so they could read the article over his shoulder.

"It says here that there's even more information on your case," Hermione stated. "Pages 3, 7, 13 and 21."

"A lot went into this lawsuit," Harry decided to elaborate even as he opened the letter, which was from Andromeda. "According to my Solicitor's information there were over 32 companies that illegally used my name to advertise their products. Not only that, but all the information in those books were completely false, which is illegal according to the Pure-blood Media Protection Act of 1743. And that's not even going into the fact that they illegally used the name of The-Boy-Who-Lived. Combine my status as a pure-blood heir to one of the Five Founding Families and it was pretty much political suicide for them to do this." He shook his head. "I honestly wonder if they truly believed they could get away with this."

"Probably," Daphne rested her cheek against Harry's shoulder as her eyes scanned the article. He wondered if she was doing this on purpose, or just letting her curiosity get the better of her. "I believe they assumed you either wouldn't care, or would be so excited to see books and action

figures of yourself that you would just be okay with it."

Harry's countenance darkened slightly.

"Well, they shouldn't have."

"Indeed."

"It says here that you sued them for 65% of the money they earned from those books," Lisa looked up from the article. "That's a lot of money."

"It is, and unfortunately I didn't get the full 65%," Harry smiled as he read Andromeda's letter. She had really come through for him. "Not that I expected to. My projected range of what I could actually get was 45%, which I did end up getting. That was aside from the public apology. It also means that if anyone wants to use my name for any reason, they'll need to ask for my permission since I've now set a precedent."

"Tell me why you're in Gryffindor again," Blaise said with a touch of dryness. "Because I seem to have forgotten the reason."

Harry gave his dark skinned friend a magnanimous smile.

"Why Blaise, didn't you know? The true place of any Slytherin is definitely Gryffindor."

As Blaise tried to contain his snickers and Daphne smirked, Tracey Davis squealed. It looked like she had discovered the article on page 21.

"I can't believe this!" She looked over at Harry with wide, excited eyes. "You endorsed the new Nimbus 2001s!"

"I have," Harry smiled, both at his friend's enthusiasm and at the thought of the money he made from that endorsement. "Last year my solicitor got a letter from Nimbus Broom Racing Company asking for permission to use my name for their new brooms. It seems one of their spotters was at the Hogwarts Quidditch matches to see how the Nimbus 2000s were working and saw me play. I had them wait to announce this until after my lawsuit went through, however."

"Have I ever told you how much I love you?" asked Tracey, batting her eyelashes at him. Harry gave her a dry look.

"I'm not going to get you a Nimbus 2001. I already bought you a broom."

"Aw, come on, Harry! Be a pal and use those magic connections to get me a new broom."

"Nope."

Tracey gave him a pout.

"Meany."

Harry didn't say anything, though he did roll his eyes. Daphne on the other hand, had no trouble speaking her mind.

"Idiot."

She was rather succinct in her thoughts.

"Oi!"

XoX

After breakfast, the group of ten split off to their first class of the day. Harry, Hannah, Hermione, Neville and Susan all shared double Herbology, so they were off to the Greenhouses.

"This is going to be the best. We're finally going to get to use Greenhouse three. Did you know they have a Venomous Tantacula in it? Professor Sprout actually let me in once last year when I was helping her plant Shrivelfigs."

Naturally, the most excited of the group was Neville, who was the Herbology expert among them.

"I'm glad someone's excited about Herbology," Hannah grouched a bit. "I for one am not looking forward to getting dirt all over my clothes."

"It's not that bad," Susan tried to defend the class their head of house

taught. Hannah just gave her friend a mild look of exasperation.

"It is that bad. Last year I ended up getting dirt in my robes because someone thought it would be a good idea to have a mud fight when Professor Sprout went to get an extra pair of gloves."

"If you get dirty again, I'll just spell you clean," Harry offered. "I know a spell specifically made for cleaning dirt off robes."

"Thank you," Hannah said in a tone that was both grateful but also tense, "but I would rather just not get dirty in the first place."

"Wouldn't we all?"

"Isn't Shrivelfig one of the main ingredients in Shrinking Solution and the Elixir to Induce Euphoria?" Hermione asked Neville, who responded to her question eagerly.

"It is, but Shrinking Solution also uses Daisy Roots, Wormwood and Cowbane."

The group soon came upon the Greenhouses. There were three of them not including Professor Sprout's office. The Hogwarts Greenhouses were very long, rectangular structures with a lot of windows on both the walls and roofs to allow the plants inside the necessary sunlight. The roofs were peaked, and running along their tops was a long, serpentine dragon being used for decoration.

Professor Sprout was already waiting for the group of students walking down the lawn.

"We're going to be using Greenhouse three this year," she said without preamble as she held the door open for her students. "Everybody inside."

As soon as Harry stepped inside, the scent of damp earth mingling with fertilizer and the heavy perfume of giant, umbrella-sized flowers dangling from the ceiling nearly overpowered him. It was a horribly heady scent that nearly caused Harry to stumble.

"Are you okay, Harry?" asked Susan, who saw the slight hesitation in his

step. Harry cast a glance her way and smiled.

"Yes, I'm fine," he forced himself not to cringe at how the mixture of scents were playing havoc with his nose. Times like these actually made him regret his animagus form. "Thank you."

Susan smiled, her cheeks flushed with a light shade of pink. Harry could not help but think the look really suited her. The girl was rather pretty when she blushed.

He was really beginning to wish he had put earplugs in his ears when his non-magical friend, Lisa, began reading those stories to him. Damn his lack of foresight.

Professor Sprout made to stand behind a trestle bench in the center of the Greenhouse as everyone took their place. Harry found himself standing between Susan and Neville.

"We'll be re-potting Mandrakes today," Professor Sprout began without preamble. "Who can tell me the properties of a Mandrake?"

Harry, Hannah, Hermione and Susan all turned to look at Neville, who flushed a bit under their scrutiny before raising his hand.

"Yes, Neville?"

"Mandrakes are a very human-like plant that is used in Mandrake Restorative Drought, which is able to cure someone of petrification," Neville sounded absolutely nothing like his normally shy self when talking Herbology, despite being surrounded by a number of his peers. Harry was actually pretty proud of how far the round faced boy had come. "Additionally, it's used in many other antidotes and can turn many people who have been cursed or transfigured back to their original state."

"An excellent explanation, Neville! Ten Points for Gryffindor." Professor Sprout looked at her favorite student fondly. "Now, the Mandrake forms an essential part of most antidotes, but it's also the most dangerous. Neville," she called on him again, "can you tell me why?"

"Er... yes!" Neville stood at attention once more. "When a Mandrake is

fully matured, it's cry is fatal to all who hear it."

"Correct. Another ten points for Gryffindor," Professor Sprout said. "Now, the Mandrakes we have here are very young."

She pointed to a row of deep trays as she spoke, and everyone shuffled forward for a better look. A hundred or so tufty little plants, purplish green in color, were growing there in rows. They didn't look like much, but Harry knew not to judge anything based on first appearances. The most important part of the Mandrake was underneath the ground, the roots.

"Everyone take a pair of earmuffs," said Professor Sprout.

There was a scramble as everyone tried to seize a pair that wasn't pink and fluffy.

"When I tell you to put them on, make sure your ears are completely covered," said Professor Sprout. "When it is safe to remove them, I will give you the thumbs-up. Right — earmuffs on."

Harry snapped the earmuffs over his ears. They shut out sound completely. Professor Sprout put the pink, fluffy pair over her own ears, rolled up the sleeves of her robes, grasped one of the tufty plants firmly, and pulled hard.

Just like Harry had thought, instead of standard looking roots, a root that looked more like an extremely hideous baby popped out of the earth. The leaves were growing right out of the things head, and it had green, mottled skin. It was also crying something fierce, clearly screaming at the tops of it's lungs.

Professor Sprout took a large plant pot from under the table and plunged the Mandrake into it, burying him in dark, damp compost until only the tufted leaves were visible. Professor Sprout dusted off her hands, gave them all the thumbs-up, and removed her own earmuffs.

"As our Mandrakes are only seedlings, their cries won't kill yet," she said calmly as though she'd just done nothing more exciting than water a begonia. "However, they will knock you out for several hours, and as I'm sure none of you want to miss your first day back, make sure your

earmuffs are securely in place while you work. I will attract your attention when it is time to pack up."

"Four to a tray — there is a large supply of pots here — compost in the sacks over there — and be careful of the Venomous Tentacula, it's teething."

She gave a sharp slap to a spiky, dark red plant as she spoke, making it draw in the long feelers that had been inching sneakily over her shoulder.

Because there were five of them, the group decided to split up. Harry grabbed Susan's hand, feeling a little disappointed that she was wearing gloves. He wanted to see if her skin was as soft as Daphne's.

Ignoring his hormone driven thoughts with ease of practice, he gave his friend a slight smile.

"Come on, let's find another two to partner with."

Susan's cheeks became infused with a lovely tinge of pink. She gave him a nod and a soft spoken, "okay," as he began dragging her over to another table.

Harry and Susan ended up partnering with Justin Finch-Fletchley and Megan Jones, a dark skinned witch with brown hair and eyes who was only a bit shorter than Harry. Justin on the other hand was a curly-haired boy with pale skin, dark colored hair and dark eyes.

"Justin," Harry greeted, "Haven't seen you since the Hogwarts Express."

At the mention of the train ride to Hogwarts, Justin grinned while Susan gave Harry a mildly reproachful look. She still hadn't quite forgiven him for scaring her half to death.

"Yeah," he said cheerfully, "That was the coolest thing I've ever seen, by the way. I don't think there's going to be much this year that can top watching you jump into the Hogwarts Express while flying a broom."

"You jumped into the Hogwarts Express while flying a broom!?" Megan Jones practically shouted, bringing attention to herself from everyone

else in the room.

"Is there a problem Miss Jones?" asked Professor Sprout. Megan flushed.

"No Professor. I just got surprised by something is all."

Professor Sprout gave her one last look before turning away. When she did, Harry cast the girl a mildly exasperated look.

"Yes, I did. I had missed the Express due to... extenuating circumstances and had no way of getting into contact with Hogwarts because I had sent Hedwig on ahead. By the way," Harry quickly changed the subject before she could say anything incriminating to him. He had learned just recently that while males thought recklessly stupid stunts were the height of 'awesome', girl's often believed they were just plain stupid. "Do you have any relation to the Gwenog Jones of the Hollyhead Harpies?"

"Everyone always asks me that," Megan sighed. Harry got the impression she was used to people asking her this. "Yes, I do. Gwenog is my aunt." She peered at him with a sense of inquisitiveness. "I'm surprised you didn't ask me that sooner."

Harry shrugged.

"I had not even known about anything about national Quidditch Teams until near the end of last year, so I had no idea who Gwenog Jones was at the time."

"Ah."

Conversation ceased after that as they were forced to put their earmuffs back on and concentrate on the task at hand. Harry soon realized why they needed to focus so completely on what they were doing.

Pulling out Mandrakes was difficult. Mandrakes just did not want to come out of the earth. Not only did they not want to be pulled out, but once out, they didn't seem to want to go back in either. They struggled, squirming and kicking and flailing their fists and gnashing their teeth. Harry only managed to pot his Mandrake in two minutes because he used magic to

enhance his muscles and force the stubborn thing into one of the pots.

A quick glance around showed that only Neville had done better than him. No surprise there. Harry might have just as much knowledge on Herbology as his friend did, but when it came to practical experience, the young heir to the Longbottom fortune had him beat.

Seeing Susan struggling to still remove her plant from its pot, Harry moved over to her and gently placed a mitted hand over her own purple mitts. Susan gave a startled jerk, looked over, then flushed lightly when she saw who was near her.

How cute.

Harry tried to let her know he was offering to help her. Communication was difficult, but through a series of hand gestures, pointing and making strange faces, he succeeded in getting his point across. At least, he assumed her blushing nod was her assent to his offer of assistance.

Moving behind her, Harry pressed his chest against her back and wrapped his mitt-covered hands around hers. He was very glad the mitts weren't all that thick, relying on enchantments to permanently place durability charms on them to protect the hands. This allowed him to wrap his hands around Susan's much more easily than it would if they were muggle mitts.

From his place behind her, the young raven-haired second year was able to pick up the increase in both Susan's heartbeat and breathing. He could also see the skin around her neck and cheeks were flushed red.

That made him wonder. Was she enjoying this contact as much as he was? Or was she just embarrassed?

With Harry's help, Susan was easily able to pot and re-pot the Mandrake, though by the time they were done her skin was flushed and a tad sweaty, and not all of it was from physical exertion.

By the end of the class, Harry's group and Neville's group had both earned twenty points for Gryffindor and Hufflepuff for showing outstanding school unity and teamwork. The group then parted ways,

with Hannah giving them a cheerful goodbye and Susan only giving them a slight stutter before she hurried off, her face redder than her hair.

"What was all that about?" asked Neville while Hermione gave Harry a knowing look. The Heir to House Potter just shrugged, not willing to admit to having been the most likely cause of their friends embarrassment.

Their next class was Transfiguration, which the Gryffindors shared with Ravenclaw this year. On their way to Professor McGonagall's classroom, Harry found himself being halted by one of the few people he had been hoping to avoid as much as possible.

"Harry!" Gilderoy Lockhart strolled up to Harry and his two friends, his large white teeth gleaming as he gave the boy a dazzling smile. "Harry, Harry, Harry."

"Why don't you two go on ahead," Harry said to a lovestruck Hermione and a confused Neville. "I have a feeling this is going to take a while."

As Neville dragged off the still awed looking Hermione, Harry turned to the new DADA Professor and withheld a sigh.

"Can I help you, Professor?" he asked politely.

"Harry, Harry, Harry," Professor Lockhart repeated again. Just why the man was repeating his name so much was beyond Harry. "When I saw what you did this morning — well, of course, it was all my fault. Could have kicked myself."

Harry did not have any clue what this buffoon was talking about, but he knew that whatever it was, it wasn't going to be pleasant. For him that is.

He had no idea.

XoX

Harry Potter was not quite seething as he stomped his way towards Professor McGonagall's classroom, but he was most certainly angry. Had anyone been in the hallway as he walked to his Transfiguration class they probably would have run the opposite way.

The reason for Harry's anger was, of course, Gildery Lockhart. The buffoon of a man had cornered him on his way to class with Neville and Hermione, and had actually had the audacity to assume the reason Harry had gotten a front page article this morning was because he was trying to follow in Lockhart's footsteps.

Lockhart's exact words had been, *"Gave you a taste for publicity, didn't I? Gave you the bug. You got onto the front page of the paper with me and you couldn't wait to do it again."* He had then gone on to state that Harry shouldn't be so focused on becoming famous because he was still young and that making a lawsuit against companies illegally using his name was an inappropriate way to go about earning fame anyways.

As if Harry actually needed to be more famous than he already was. He had been famous when he was still in his nappies! The first time he had ever set foot into the Wizarding World he had been mobbed by a group of rabid witches and wizards wanting to shake his hand!

How dare that arrogant, insolent prick speak to him like that!? Who the hell did that man think he was!? Harry hadn't even heard of Gilderoy Lockhart until this summer! What did that say about his fame?

Finally reaching the Transfiguration classroom, Harry pressed a palm against the wall and leaned into it for support. He took several deep breaths and cleared his mind. It wouldn't do to go into class angry.

When he felt sufficiently calm and in control, the young boy straightened his robes and entered the classroom.

It was clear the moment he entered that class was already well in session. Harry could see the students were trying to accomplish a spell of some kind. They were waving their wand at a beetle. If Harry were to judge based on Hermione's already successful Transfiguration, he would have to say they were trying to turn the beetle into a button.

"Mister Potter," Professor McGonagall's words had the class turning to look at Harry, "is there a reason you are late."

"My apologies, Professor," Harry said sincerely. "Professor Lockhart managed to find me on my way here and wanted to... speak with me

about something."

"I see," Professor McGonagall looked aggravated, though Harry could tell it was not directed at him. "You missed the lecture. I won't deduct points this time, as it was a professor who held you up, but do try not to be late from now on. Now, please take your seat and ask one of your friends for the notes they took in class."

Harry nodded and quickly took a seat in between Lisa Turpin and Terry Boot.

Class soon got back to work and Professor McGonagall gave Harry his own beetle to work on transfiguring. "Ask your friends for the specifics," she said, before leaving him to his work.

"Lisa, Terry," Harry greeted his friends with a congenial, if slightly stiff, nod. "Did you have an enjoyable first class?"

"It was alright." Terry shrugged, then waved his wand over the beetle with very precise wand movements as he muttered the incantation under his breath. Nothing. An intense sigh escaped his lips. "We didn't learn any new spells, but we did learn how to make all the spells we do know more powerful."

"I see, so Flitwick made you go over the first chapter of *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2* then?" Harry asked as he waved his wand over the beetle, his movements nowhere near as precise or flowy as Terry's. The beetle turned into a button less than a second later.

"How do you do that?" asked Terry, shaking his head in envy. "I've been at this for ten minutes before you showed up, yet you got this spell on your first try without even having heard Professor McGonagall's lecture."

"Transfiguration is all about visualization and concentration," Harry shrugged. "It's very easy to do so long as you can picture what you want to transfigure in your mind."

"Ugh, well no wonder it's so hard for me," Terry groaned. "Imagination has never been my strongest point."

Harry gave a helpless shrug, as if to say 'can't help you there' before turning to his button. Another wave of his wand and the button was once more a beetle.

"Ten points to Gryffindor, Mister Potter, for figuring out how to reverse the Transfiguration," Professor McGonagall spoke up when she saw what he did.

"Thank you, Professor," Harry accepted her offer of points with a gracious nod, even though he did not approve of the House Point system.

Class continued and Harry helped Terry with his Transfiguration. If anything, the boy was worse at Transfiguring objects and animals than Neville, who really just needed more confidence. Still, Harry did what he could to help out his friend.

"Do you need any help, Lisa?" asked Harry as he noticed his other Ravenclaw friend staring at him.

"No, I'm all good here." To prove this, she cast the spell on her beetle and transfigured it into a button. "What about you? Are you alright?" she asked, the suddenness of her question causing Harry to blink. He looked over at her, his eyes silently asking for clarification. "Ever since you walked into class you've seemed really... I don't know, tense or something."

Harry opened his mouth to speak, but snapped it shut just as quickly. He didn't really know what to think. Should he feel pleased that his friends (or at least Lisa Turpin) knew him so well that she could actually tell when he was upset even when he had used Occlumency to calm down? Or should he feel ashamed that he was apparently so easy to read?

He also wondered why it seemed that only the girls in his group of friends seemed capable of detecting his moods. Daphne he could understand, she was trained to read people's emotions, and Susan was incredibly observant, but Lisa? While she was a pure-blood, she was not a *pure-blood*. There was a difference between the standard pure-bloods and those who were considered a part of the nobility. She had none of the training Daphne went through and did not have the benefit of being the niece to a former auror turned Department Head.

Whatever the case was, he could not deny he felt a little warm that Lisa was concerned about him.

"I'm fine," Harry smiled at the girl, who graced him with a smile in turn. She really did have a beautiful smile. Combined with her fair skin, small nose and dark, mysterious eyes, Harry could tell she was going to be gorgeous when she grew up. "Thank you, though. For being concerned," he added when he saw Lisa raise an eyebrow. "It's nice to know my friends worry over me."

"Of course we worry over you," Lisa still had a smile on her face as she shook her head. "With the number of times you got yourself hurt last year, I think we have a bit of a right to be worried."

"It's not like I deliberately tried to get myself injured, you know," Harry sighed.

"Doesn't change what happened."

"True."

Class soon ended. As the students were gathering their books and buttons (if they managed to complete the Transfiguration), Harry bade his friends goodbye and told them he would meet up with them in a few minutes after he spoke with Professor McGonagall.

"Can I help you, Mister Potter?" asked Professor McGonagall as she looked at him over her rectangular glasses.

"I should hope so," Harry replied, his words making the normally stern professor smile. "I was actually wondering if you could set up a meeting between myself and the Hogwarts staff."

Professor McGonagall blinked several times, as if she was not quite sure she had heard him right.

"The entire staff?"

"At least all the teachers and the Headmaster," Harry amended. "I have... well, I have a proposal of sorts, a number of proposals actually, that I

wanted to pass by the faculty that I believe would go a long way towards helping improve both the school and interhouse unity."

"I see," Professor McGonagall was silent for a moment. "And you are not going to tell me what this proposal of yours is, are you?"

"Not unless it's in front of the rest of the Hogwarts Professors," Harry confirmed her question. The stern looking Headmistress studied her favorite student for several long seconds. Harry remained standing with his back straight and shoulders set as he held himself up to her scrutiny.

Finally.

"I will inform Albus that you wish to speak with the staff," she informed him. "I do not know if your request for a meeting will be answered, but I will at least let him know you wish to have one."

"That's all I can ask," Harry thanked Professor McGonagall, who answered with a small smile, before he turned and left the Transfiguration classroom.

XoX

Harry managed to catch up with his friends just in time to make it to their next class. He had used one of the few secret entrances that he had discovered during those times he had explored the castle on his own.

Like last year, Gryffindor and Slytherin were sharing the class together. It actually made Harry wonder. Until last year, there had always been an intense rivalry between Gryffindor and Slytherin (there still was, but he liked to think he was curtailing that rivalry a bit). Why then, did the school see fit to put the two Houses in the same class for both Potions and Defense Against the Dark Arts?

Not that Harry was complaining. He enjoyed spending time with his Slytherin friends, particularly Daphne, for reasons that were becoming more and more obvious to the raven haired boy.

After greeting his friends, Harry and the group of six split into pairs. Harry found himself sitting with Daphne while Blaise and Neville got their own

work space and Tracey and Hermione found themselves working together. Tracey did not look too happy about not getting to sit next to him, but Daphne seemed to be making a concerted effort towards getting as much time with him as possible.

He wished he knew why. Hunches were all well and good, but without concrete evidence he wasn't going to risk acting on those hunches.

Not that he was sure he would even if his theory was confirmed. Puberty or not, he was far too young to be thinking about entering a romantic relationship with anyone. Maybe in a year or two that would change, but for now, he was content with remaining friends.

The Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom looked a lot different this year than it did last year, Harry noted as he eyed the changes. For one thing, last year the place stank of garlic and now the smell was gone. For another thing, the dragon and iron chandelier had disappeared as well.

There was also the simple fact that there were a good number of portraits of none other than Gilderoy Lockhart adorning the walls. In fact, just about every bit of free space had been taken up by images of a smiling Lockhart, winking at every person they saw. It was incredibly freaky and just added further proof to Harry's belief that their newest DADA Professor was nothing but a scam artist.

It was even creepier than when Jeanette eyed him like a piece of meat.

When the whole class was seated, Lockhart cleared his throat loudly and silence fell. He reached forward, picked up Neville Longbottom's copy of *Travels with Trolls*, and held it up to show his own, winking portrait on the front.

"Me," he said, pointing at it and winking as well. "Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin, Third Class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defense League, and five-time winner of Witch Weekly's Most-Charming-Smile Award — but I don't talk about that. I didn't get rid of the Bandon Banshee by smiling at her!"

He waited for them to laugh; a few people smiled weakly. Beside Harry, Daphne's nose wrinkled cutely in distaste.

"I see you've all bought a complete set of my books — well done. I thought we'd start today with a little quiz. Nothing to worry about — just to check how well you've read them, how much you've taken in —" When he had handed out the test papers he returned to the front of the class and said, "You have thirty minutes — start — now!"

With a sigh, Harry looked down at the paper he had been given and read the questions on the test:

- 1. What is Gilderoy Lockhart's favorite color?*
- 2. What is Gilderoy Lockhart's secret ambition?*
- 3. What, in your opinion, is Gilderoy Lockhart's greatest achievement to date?*

On and on it went, over three sides of paper, right down to:

- 54. When is Gilderoy Lockhart's birthday, and what would his ideal gift be?*

If Harry had not been sure before, he was more than positive now. This class was going to be even more useless than last year's DADA class. At least Quirrel gave them some information that would help them, even if he did so with that shoddy excuse for a stutter.

At least one good thing came from all this. Harry realizing he would need to do his own self study if he wanted to learn anything remotely useful about Defense Against the Dark Arts.

Which was fine. Harry had always excelled at self improvement.

I wanted to thank everyone who reviewed last chapter. With your help, I not only got 165, but also managed to get over 2,000 reviews. Perhaps it is just me, but I'm pretty sure having 2,043 reviews and only 12 chapters is some sort of landmark. So, to all those who took the time to let me know what they thought of this story, thank you.

With that out of the way, I believe you all know how this goes. Let

me know your thoughts of this chapter as well as any ideas you have that you want to see. I won't guarantee you'll see them, but if you put it out there and I like it, I will try my hardest to find a use for it in this story.

Also, do not forget to check my blog. I should have my Q&A up for this chapter tomorrow, so you will definitely want to check it out. The link is on my profile.

potential possibilities

Chapter 13: Potential Possibilities

Harry Potter awoke from another nice dream. If nothing else, then at the very least he could say he was beginning to enjoy them as time passed. The memory he had dreamed of this time had been of the time he had helped Susan pull up and re-pot those Mandrakes.

Of course, as with all the dreams he had of his most recent memories of the times he shared with the various females in his group of friends (or women he had met like Perenelle and Selene), this one had been decidedly more than just a recalling of what had happened during that time.

This particular dream had gone much the same way as all his other dreams. He had been standing behind Susan, his front pressed against her back, his arms wrapped around her lithe frame as he held her hand and helped her pull up and re-pot her Mandrake.

He had absently noted that Susan's body was actually quite athletic, which he had easily been able to tell as he pressed up against her. It made him wonder if she actually exercised, unlike most witches and wizards, who he could tell simply from the way they moved had never exercised a day in their lives.

Her Aunt was the head of the DMLE so it would make sense for Madam Bones to run her niece through some basic drills designed to keep in shape. You never know when you might need to make a quick get away because you were being targeted due to your relatives reputation. And Amelia Bones had a big reputation. Harry didn't doubt that some people may try to target Susan to get to her.

After receiving his help, Susan had turned her head to look at him and gave him a smile, her cheeks tinged a light pink. This was where the memory shifted into a dream. During that time in Herbology, Harry had been able to keep his impulses and desires in check.

In this dream, he had not been able to do the same. When Susan had opened her mouth to speak, he had seized the moment and kissed her.

Susan had been in shock. He had been able to tell that much from the way her body had gone stiff as a board.

The shock had only lasted a second, maybe less, before Susan started kissing him back. It was just another moment that made him realize he had been dreaming. In real life, he was not sure Susan would have kissed him back even if she wanted to. The girl was just too shy to do something like that, especially in public.

Knowing her, she probably would have fainted.

Kissing dream Susan had been just as pleasant as kissing dream Daphne, only different. Daphne's lips had been soft, like his mouth was being caressed by the most expensive silk. Susan's lips had been a bit rougher, still soft, but not as soft, and had a more lush feel. Her lips were much fuller than Daphne's, whose lips were full, yet thinner.

As the kiss had continued, Harry and Susan had began getting even more into the act. Harry's tongue had penetrated her mouth while his hands began to lightly caress and explore her body. Like all girls at that age, she was beginning to develop, a fact he had discovered when his hands roved the undersides of her breasts and teased her hips. Girl's went through puberty faster than boys, he knew.

At least most boys. Harry wasn't sure he counted seeing as he was going through what must have been an accelerated version of puberty.

Unfortunately — or fortunately, Harry had yet to decide which — that had been where the dream ended and he woke up, lying in his bed. He had yet to decide whether he was disappointed or not, but figured he had plenty of time to debate this particular point of possible contention.

Looking around, it was to see the four curtains of his bed closed, the reason for this was because he had begun getting into the habit of setting up silencing charms, which were easier to cast in an enclosed space.

With a soft sigh of mild disappointment mixed with relief, Harry magically

cleaned his mess and got out of bed so he could get dressed. The sun still hadn't risen all the way yet, though light was beginning to peak out from the horizon. Harry could see the multiple colors as dawn approached; mostly pinks and oranges with a hint of red.

Neville was just beginning to stir, so Harry grabbed his work out clothes from his trunk and quickly got changed into a pair of black gym shorts, a dark green tank top with large cut outs where his arms were and black sneakers. By the time he had finished dressing, Neville was finally awake and sitting up in his bed, rubbing his eyes of the sleep that had accumulated on them.

"Morning, Nev," Harry alerted Neville to the fact that he was awake. When the round faced boy looked over at him, he continued, "I'll wait downstairs while you get dressed."

"Alright," Neville yawned for a moment before crawling out of bed. "I'll be down in just a second."

As Neville began going through his own trunk in search of his exercise clothes Harry asked him to get, the young Potter heir made his way downstairs to the Gryffindor Common room.

Because it was so early in the morning, no one else was awake. The Common Room was empty. Even the fire that could normally be found crackling merrily away had been put out.

The sounds of footsteps coming downstairs caused Harry to look towards the staircase. The footsteps were not Neville's. They were much too light, too precise.

As if to confirm his thoughts, Hermione walked came into view a few second later wearing a pair of tight black capris work out pants that stopped mid calf, a white Tank top and athletic sneakers. Her hair was also tied into a tight ponytail behind her head, though several bushy strands had managed to come out and messily framed her face.

Harry had to admit, while Hermione was not as pretty as Daphne nor did she have the sheer cuteness factor his friend Lisa possessed, she was still very striking in her own way. She actually reminded him of the main

female protagonist in one of the many books Lisa read to him in her effort to convince him they were good books. *The Librarian*, he believed it was called.

And the less said about that book the better.

"Hermione," Harry greeted as she walked into the Common Room. "Are you joining Neville and I today?" He had invited all of his friends to join him on his morning workouts. Most had outright refused, though a few had looked intrigued by the idea.

"Of course," Hermione said, blinking a little. She looked tired. Harry assumed that was because she was not used to waking up this early. "What you said about our body and magic made sense, and I want my magic and body to be stronger."

"I'm glad to hear that," Harry tilted his head, "Where did you get those clothes?" He was sure she had not brought a pair of workout clothes to school with her.

"Transfigured them."

Ah. That explained it.

"You know your Transfiguration isn't going to last for more than a few hours at most, right?" asked Harry.

"I know," Hermione blinked again and looked down at herself. She seemed to be judging her outfit, as if trying to determine how long they would last simply by looking at them. "But it will be fine until I can send a letter to my parents, asking them to buy me a pair."

Harry nodded. "True enough."

A few seconds later, Neville walked down the stairs. Though he was surprised by Hermione's appearance, he greeted her just as he always did.

The trio made their way out of the Common Room and into one of Hogwarts many corridors. It took a grand total of fifteen minutes to make

it to the large pair of double doors that led outside, and that was only because Harry knew his way around Hogwarts like the back of his hand thanks to his eidetic memory. His mind had literally mapped out every square inch of Hogwarts that he had seen.

When they finally reached the front door, it was to see two other people waiting for them.

Daphne Greengrass and Susan Bones stood in front of the doors that led out to the Hogwarts grounds. Susan, Harry noticed, was wearing a tank top and what looked like a surprisingly short pair of red shorts that hugged her hips very nicely and revealed surprisingly tone thighs. It was very obvious to him that she at least did a lot of leg exercises.

It took a concerted effort of will on his part not to blatantly stare at her. Harry was sure the only reason he did not do so was because she noticed him looking at her legs and gave an embarrassed blush as she tightly gripped the hems of her shorts and looked like she was about to pull them down in an effort to cover more skin.

The other girl waiting for them, Daphne, was wearing a very light set of robes. Or at least he thought they were robes. The outfit looked more like a pair of light blue, skin tight pants and long sleeve shirt combination with a shoulder cape that stopped several inches below her developing chest.

Like Susan, Harry could tell that Daphne was in somewhat decent shape. With her clothes so tight against her skin, it was easy for him to see certain areas where she was gaining muscle tone (which really added to her beauty in his opinion). In particular, her hips and legs were shaping to be quite stunning.

Harry found his eyes wandering from Susan to Daphne as he tried to figure out where he should look.

In the end, he felt it was safer to just not look at either of them.

This was much easier said than done.

On a side note, he was curious to know what kind of dream this would bring about the next time he slept.

"Good morning you two," Harry greeted as Neville and Hermione gave their own good mornings. "You two joining us?"

"Obviously," Daphne said in a slightly sarcastic drawl. There was a slight smirk on her face that Harry could not help but find strangely appealing. "I don't think we'd be up this early in the morning, wearing clothes like these because we felt like it."

"Very true," Harry nodded, his eyes getting drawn to what Daphne was wearing. He told himself it was purely academic interest in her outfit. "Is that some kind of special wizarding work out clothes or something?"

"I suppose," Daphne tilted her head slightly to look at her outfit. "This is actually the uniform I learned how to dance in. Well, a variation of that uniform. I always keep one set with me when I started going to Hogwarts so I can practice dancing techniques on my own time in an empty classroom."

Harry nodded. He knew that Nathaniel Greengrass had made her learn how to dance at an early age along with the rest of her training to be the perfect pure-blood woman, and it was obvious she was keeping her skills sharp so as not to disappoint the cold man.

He didn't think it was out of any desire to make her father proud, not anymore at least, but more out of a need to be the best she can so she wouldn't be punished.

At least he knew why her legs and hips looked so amazing. Dancing focused mostly on lower body strength. At least, the kind of dancing pure-bloods were taught did. He doubted they'd learn any types of dance other than traditional ballroom dancing and maybe ballet.

"Well, let's not waste anymore time then," Harry said as he started for the door. "Come on."

With a bit of a heave and some magic, the large, double doors opened up and allowed the group now consisting of five to leave the castle and enter the grounds that surrounded Hogwarts.

The group began walking towards the Black Lake, their feet padding

along the soft grass. Hermione and Neville were in a discussion about what Harry planned on having them work on. Though the term discussion may have been slightly misleading. Hermione was asking Neville all kinds of questions on what Harry had him do last year, while Neville was trying his hardest to keep up with the girl's fast paced talking.

There was one similarity between Lisa Crawft and his bushy haired friend. Neither needed to pause for breath when they spoke.

As the group made their way along the ground of Hogwarts, Harry walked up until he was traveling abreast of Susan. His friend had been very quiet since their greeting, and judging by the redness of her cheeks, he could take a very accurate guess as to why.

"How are you doing this morning, Sue?"

Susan looked over at him, flushed, then looked away.

"I'm fine," she mumbled softly, and Harry got the feeling she was embarrassed by the way he had been staring at her before.

Shame crept into him. Harry could not help but curse himself for allowing his hormones to get the better of him. Surely he could do better then this? He *was* better than this. Harry had always had supreme control of his emotions since he learned the art of meditation from Master Wei. It should not be that hard to keep his eyes from wandering.

At least, that's what he kept telling himself. Even now it was a struggle not to look at the red head he was walking next to or Daphne.

It was probably worse for Susan than it was for Daphne. At least his blond haired friend had experience with keeping her emotions hidden and being stared at during public events. Her father had made sure of that. Susan was notoriously shy. He could only imagine how embarrassed she was.

"Listen," Harry grabbed Susan's attention again. She looked at him, still slightly embarrassed, but also inquisitive. "I wanted to apologize for... uh... you know?" Wow, not only was he having trouble keeping himself under control, apologizing for something like this was also very

embarrassing. It had been a long time since Harry felt truly embarrassed by anything. At least to this extent.

It didn't take very long for Susan to realize what he was talking about. Her cheeks flushed a brilliant shade of red as she looked away.

"It-it's fine," she whispered lowly. Were it not for his enhanced hearing, he would not have heard her at all.

"No, it's not fine," Harry shook his head. "I should be better than that. You're my friend and I've made you uncomfortable. So, I'm sorry."

Susan looked at him again. Her cheeks were still flushed, but she somehow managed to maintain eye contact in spite of her embarrassment.

"It's okay," Susan was still speaking softly, but it was not the whisper it had been. "I'm just... not used to be... to being looked at... like that."

"Well," Harry scratched the back of his neck as he looked at the Black lake. He felt his own face growing a little warm from the subject they were discussing. Did anyone else ever have to go through something as embarrassing as this when they were kids? "We are pretty young. I mean, most of us are just starting to..." he trailed off as he tried to find a more elegant way of saying puberty that would not embarrass the red head. "Grow up," he decided, "so it's not like these situations would have come up before."

"Yeah..."

The pair soon delved into an awkward silence, neither really knowing what to say.

Harry found himself frowning. It really shouldn't be this difficult to converse with Susan. Or any other female for that matter. Yet, for whatever reason, he found himself at a complete loss for words.

Seriously, why was speaking after an embarrassing situation such a complicating endeavor?

Harry's thoughts were halted as he felt something brush against his hand on the opposite side of Susan. He turned his head to see Daphne walking alongside of him. Once more, he couldn't help but note how close she was walking. There was barely a few centimeters between them. Their shoulders were almost touching, and every time their hands finished descending from their slight swing, they would touch.

"Have you always gotten up this early?" asked Daphne. Harry blinked at the randomness of the question, but couldn't help but be thankful for the distraction. Thinking on it, he actually wouldn't be surprised if that was her intention all along.

"Yes. Ever since I was seven I started waking up around this time to exercise."

"That's pretty young to be waking up so early," Susan mused, more to herself than anyone else. She gasped when Harry and Daphne looked at her and realized she had spoken out loud. "S-sorry..."

"I don't know why you're apologizing," Daphne drawled in her standard, sarcastic tongue. Despite this, there was no sting to her words, though it was clear she was teasing Susan a bit. "It's not like you did anything wrong."

Susan flushed further and looked like she wanted to burrow her way into her shirt.

"It is pretty young," Harry admitted, seeking to divert Susan's attention away from her own embarrassment. "But I started learning martial arts at a young age. Because learning hand to hand combat requires a strong body, I started getting up early to exercise before going to school. That way I had time to get a part time job, mowing lawns for people in my neighborhood in the afternoons."

"Oh... I see..." Susan trailed off unsurely.

"So what about you two?" asked Harry, "I'm kind of surprised you girls were able to wake up so early. Most people seem to prefer sleeping in." Lisa was a very heavy sleeper. If he were to go by what he knew of her, then most girls enjoyed sleeping in until they absolutely had to get up.

"I'm sort of used to getting up early to see my auntie off," Susan answered. "Because of her job, she almost always gets up really early, and if I don't wake up before... five or so, she'll leave for work before I can say goodbye."

Harry nodded, then turned to look at Daphne, who just shrugged.

"It was expected of me to get up early."

"Because of your father?" asked Harry while Susan looked at the two in confusion. She did not know about Daphne's past. No one among their group of friends did, not even Tracey knew the true extent of how much of a bastard the man really was. And Harry had no intention of informing anyone of what the blond haired Slytherin had gone through. It was her story to tell.

"...Yes."

Harry's hand twitched as he was overcome with a sudden urge to grab Daphne's hand. It was as if hearing her answer, however short it was, made him want to comfort her.

He knew she didn't need it, so he ignored the urge, for the most part.

"It must have been difficult," he said instead. Daphne must have heard the respect in his voice because she turned to look at him, a soft smile playing on her lips.

"It was." Harry wondered if she was mind reader or something, since he soon found Daphne holding his hand. She had managed to slide her fingers perfectly through his and squeeze them gently. "But it's fine now. Because I wake up so early, I was able to better care for Stori. In some ways, I'm actually thankful for the training."

Harry nodded and squeezed her hand back reassuringly, before looking out at the great lake as they stopped near its shore. It had taken them a bit longer than usual to get there since they had walked so slowly. Off in the distance, the giant squid could be seen with its tentacles lazing above the water's surface.

"Do you two have your own routines to follow?" Harry asked as he turned to face all his friends. He directed his question towards Daphne and Susan.

"I do, but I'm actually interested in seeing what you do," Daphne told him.

"Same here," Susan said softly.

"Okay then," Harry looked from the two girls he had been talking to, to Neville and Hermione. "Then the first thing we're going to do are stretches. It's important to make sure that your body is limber before exercising so that you don't pull a muscle. Afterwards, we'll warm up with a run around the Black Lake. Let's get started."

XoX

Harry's exercise routine was very intense, Daphne soon found out. She had thought she would be prepared for his work out, thought that the exercises she habitually did to keep in shape for her dancing would have let her keep up.

Never in her life had she been proven more wrong. Harry Potter was an absolute maniac when it came to exercising. The way he pushed himself when doing physically strenuous activities bordered on the insane. Daphne had not even done the 'true' Harry Potter work out routine, the one he had made for himself, but she had followed along as best she could and quickly found herself being left in the dust by the extremely fit boy.

The work out had started out with them doing stretches. Apparently, there were a lot of different muscle groups that needed to be stretched out; the chest (Harry called them pectoral muscles), lower back, upper back, biceps, triceps, hamstrings, calves, quadriceps, torso, Daphne had never heard of these muscles or of the stretches that were involved in keeping them loose and limber.

She wasn't sure whether to be impressed or daunted by how much seemed to actually be involved in the act of stretching. There were enough stretches of various muscle groups that it made her head spin just thinking about it.

Her dance instructors only had her go through basic stretches before making her do her routine. It seemed they had not done a very thorough job of learning how to stretch properly, or maybe they just didn't need to. It wasn't like dancing used all of the muscle groups Harry planned on having them work on.

After the stretches were complete, Harry had them run around the Great Lake. Because of how most witches and wizards generally lacked stamina, he had told them to do only as many laps as they could.

Hermione had been the first to drop out, she hadn't even managed to get a single lap around the Black Lake before exhausting herself. This was not surprising as the girl had probably never exercised a day in her life. She probably spent more time in the library than out running or exercising. Neville had been next. While the round faced boy had grown in confidence, he was really only starting to work on his physical fitness. According to Harry, last year they had focused mainly on stretching in preparation for this year. She and Susan had followed soon after. Susan had managed to actually do a full two laps while Daphne had only done one and a half. Still, the Black Lake was very large, so she wasn't going to complain.

On the other hand, Harry had managed five laps around the lake in the same amount of time it took Susan to finish her two and still didn't look very winded. It just went to show Daphne how much better shape he was in than most people. He could probably give Quidditch stars a run for their money.

After the warm up (Daphne did not consider ten laps around the Black Lake a warm up. Harry did), they began working on what Harry called the core of his routine. He had told them that he always split up his exercises each day by muscle groups. Today they would be working on their core muscles (Abdominal muscles Harry had called them), tomorrow would be legs (Quads, thighs and calves). Since it was Thursday, they would only be doing those two exercises this week. Harry said that weekends were always recovery days (meaning they relaxed), but Mondays would be chest and triceps (another term for triceps was horseshoe muscle. It was the one on the bottom of your arm that looked like a U when flexed), and Tuesday would be back and biceps.

Wednesdays Harry told them was when he worked on his martial arts, so they could either use it as another day to relax, he could give them some cardio work outs, or they could do their own exercises. Daphne planned on using that time to practice her dancing.

Once again, Hermione was the first to drop out. She was followed by Neville and Daphne. Susan, surprisingly enough, had managed to do the most after Harry, who was still exercising long after the others had finished.

Which was probably why Daphne found herself sitting under a tree, sweaty and exhausted, watching as Harry continued exercising. Even if she would have denied it, she could not help but be fascinated by the young boy working up a sweat. It was actually very impressive to watch someone so dedicated to doing a specific task, especially one as hard as doing several hundred push ups while using their magic to float their feet at a forty-five degree angle above their heads.

Perhaps that was why she found herself watching him so fervently. Though another reason might be because of the clothes he was wearing. Daphne Greengrass had only ever seen Harry in his wizarding robes and occasionally a T-shirt. Granted, those shirts had been a snug fit, but they hadn't quite shown her just how good of shape he was in.

Daphne would freely admit she did not know much of anything about muscles aside from the basics. It wasn't like the wizarding world taught people about muscle groups and exercising and what not. She only knew because a strong body (or at least strong legs) was a necessity for dancing.

That did not stop her from admiring Harry's well muscled body. As she watched him do new set of push ups where he placed his hands together in a triangle while still keeping his feet floating so that they were elevated above his head, Daphne could actually see the way his muscles flexed with each repetition. He was, in a word, ripped.

It probably helped that his shirt had large cut outs that revealed almost the entirety of his torso instead of sleeves. She could actually see the slick, sweat covered skin of his defined torso and even make out the

beginnings of what looked a set of very nice washboard abs.

A lot of people last year had commented on how Harry looked much older than his age would suggest. Daphne had agreed with them at the time. With his height and lack of baby fat on his face, he looked more like someone in their third year than their first. Seeing just how well muscled he was, Daphne could not help but think he looked even older than his height and lack of facial pudge suggested.

Even if she did not know much about muscles, she was almost positive no twelve year old should have a body like that.

Sitting beside her, Daphne noticed that Susan Bones was also staring at Harry. Rather blatantly, in fact. The red head's eyes were locked completely on Harry's form as he worked out and her cheeks were flushed red.

Daphne frowned. She had been paying careful attention to Harry for a while now and he had given no indication that he thought of Susan as anything other than a friend.

Then again, until recently, Harry had not given any indication towards liking anyone as more than a friend. As far as she could determine, the first time he had shown interest in a girl was during the shopping trip at the end when it looked like he was going to kiss her.

What did this mean? That Harry was beginning to notice girls in a more sexual nature? Daphne had caught him staring at her several times when he thought she wasn't looking. Though this could be a consequence of her being more... physical with him than she ever had been with anyone else. Maybe he was trying to figure out what she was doing?

No. That couldn't be it. Or at least, not fully. She had caught him staring at the other girls in their group as well. Maybe he was just beginning to notice girls. He had certainly noticed her and Susan this morning.

"Daphne."

The voice jerked her out of her thoughts. Blinking, Daphne saw Susan staring at her in slight concern and it was with a start that she realized

she had been staring at the red head for a while now.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine," Daphne shook herself out of her daze. It wouldn't do to let herself get so caught off guard like that, especially by someone as uncunning as Susan. She liked the girl, Merlin bless her, but Susan was not what anyone would call clever. Smart, yes, but not clever.

She looked at the girl again, who was now watching her with mild concern.

"Do you like Harry?" Daphne blurted out her question before she could realize the implications asking such a question could lead to. Well, it was too late to take it back now.

Susan blushed.

"W-What!?"

"It's a simple question," Daphne said without letting on that she had not actually intended to be so straight forward. Her father would have frowned at seeing such an unslytherin display. "Do you like Harry?"

Susan's blush deepened as she tried to get her mouth working properly to respond. "Ah... well — it's not — I mean, yes — but it's just... you know, as a friend."

"A friend?" Daphne raised an eyebrow.

"Yes," Susan looked away, "a friend."

She was lying. Having been trained to detect lies since she was young, Daphne knew the girl was lying through her teeth. She had a crush on Harry, a big one if that blush was any indication.

Not that she could be blamed. There many girls who had a crush on Harry Potter. Daphne was positive most of the girls in their group did to some extent, and there were many females outside of their group who were crushing on the Boy-Who-Lived.

Of course, none of those girls would ever stand a chance with someone like Harry. Theirs was merely a childhood crush on the Boy-Who-Lived. None of them knew the real Harry like she and the others in their group did.

And out of those in their group, she could easily claim to know the most about Harry. Daphne highly doubted anyone else knew of the terrible childhood he went through. That was their little secret.

Daphne wondered what she should do about Susan's crush. It was clear to her that Harry might have some interest in the girl. If nothing else he found her attractive. She could be competition despite her passive and shy nature.

Then again, Susan could also be an ally. Just as she had told Harry during the New Year Gala last year, as the heiress to the House of Greengrass, Daphne was going to be married off by her father, most likely as a second wife to a powerful pure-blood house. If she worked with Susan now, they could get an early start in gaining Harry's affection and she would not have to worry about some other girl trying to stake their claim on him when he had to marry someone to help repopulate his house.

Yes, that was a decent plan. After all, wasn't it better to have someone she knew and liked become Harry's first wife rather than some random witch she may or may not get along with? The option of which choice she preferred was clear.

But then, Susan was also the last member of her house, wasn't she? That meant that, unless Amelia was willing to let the Ancient and Most Noble House of Bones die out, Susan would either need to marry someone who would let her keep her family name or marry into a house as a second wife as well.

Maybe convincing Susan to help her wouldn't be such a good idea? She didn't need someone else competing for the title of second wife. It would only hinder her goals.

Daphne felt like groaning in complaint (only her training kept her from doing so). Why was she even thinking about this? She was only twelve.

As much of a bastard as her father was, he would not marry her off until she turned seventeen (though that would not stop him from making a marriage contract for her). That meant she had plenty of time before she needed to worry about marriage.

Still, if she had to marry someone, then she wanted it to be Harry. Daphne was still unclear of just how she felt about the Potter heir, but she would not deny that she felt closer to him than anyone else. He understood her, respected her even. They shared a similar past filled with hardships, and she would not deny that the moments they had shared recently were pleasant (just thinking about that time they almost kissed sent thrills down her spine).

There was also the fact that Harry was gorgeous. Strong, muscular body. Masculine facial features that were only going to grow more attractive with time. Enchanting green eyes that literally glowed with repressed power. Even his head of messy hair was appealing in its own way. Several times Daphne had caught herself thinking about how she wanted to just run her hands through his hair.

Harry had many good qualities, and that was not even going into his personality. He was ambitious and cunning, exactly what her father wanted and expected of someone he would marry her off to. Yet he was also brave and loyal. He could be just as reckless as the rest of the Gryffindors (she had heard how he jumped on a troll's back. A very stupid move on his part), and she had seen how far he was willing to go for a friend (she only had to look at what he had done to Malfoy, both during their first year and on the Hogwarts Express). He was also very intelligent and gifted at magic (he could give all the Ravenclaws a run for their money), and was at the top of all their classes. She would not be surprised if he was better than most of the third and fourth years as well.

Yes, if there was anyone who she would want to be married off to, it would be Harry Potter.

XoX

After their morning work out, Harry and his friends went there separate ways. They were all sweaty and in need of a good shower. The girls in

particular felt very unhygienic and had a strong desire to scrub themselves down by taking a nice, long shower in steaming hot water.

Harry, Hermione and Neville made their way to the Gryffindor dorms. Meanwhile, Daphne and Susan went off to the Slytherin and Hufflepuff dorms respectively.

Feeling refreshed after taking a nice, hot shower, Harry ended up getting dressed in his Hogwarts school robes before making his way down to the Great Hall for breakfast with Neville and Hermione. On the way there, he and the other two Gryffindor students conversed.

"What classes do we have today?" asked Neville.

"It's Thursday, so today we've got DADA, followed by Charms, Herbology and Transfiguration," Harry answered dutifully.

"I bet your excited about our first class," Neville said slyly. Harry withheld a sigh. He had a feeling his friends were going to tease him about Lockhart's apparent obsession with him. They were only a day into their schooling and already the man had made what seemed to be a concerted effort towards finding him whenever he was not in class.

Upon entering the Great Hall, they found Daphne and Susan already sitting at the Gryffindor table. With them was an only half awake Tracey, a partially awake Hannah, and an amused but slightly sleepy looking Blaise.

"Good morning you three," Harry said as he sat down next to Daphne. She graced him with a beautiful smile before turning to look at her friend Tracey, who had lifted her head off the arms she had folded on the table to use as a makeshift pillow and was now blinking blearily at Harry.

"Good morning," Hannah tried to say as he yawn escaped her mouth. The girl tried to cover up her yawn with a hand, but it didn't do much good.

"Ugh," Tracey groaned before burying her head back into her arms, "what's so good about it?"

"Must you always be so difficult in the mornings?" asked an exasperated Hermione, who upon sitting down had immediately taken out one of Lockhart's books and began to read, using one of the sugar jars as a makeshift book stand while she ate.

"Do I really need to answer that?"

"I suppose not."

"Good."

Lisa and Terry arrived soon after. They looked much more refreshed than Blaise, Hannah or Tracey, especially Tracey, but that could just be because they got more sleep. Not to mention those three didn't have the benefit of adrenaline and endorphin's being released in their bodies that Harry, Hermione, Neville, Susan and Daphne had. That was one of the benefits Harry hoped his friends would soon realize came with regularly exercising.

"Morning," Lisa greeted everyone with a smile as she sat down next to Tracey, who she noticed immediately looked like someone who'd just rolled out of bed and hadn't realized it yet. "Tired, Tracey?"

"I wouldn't be if Daph didn't feel the need to wake me up and drag me down here so early in the bloody morning," Tracey's muffled voice complained.

"Language," Hermione spoke absently.

"Sod off," Tracey grumbled, "I am soo not in the mood right now."

"You'll have to forgive Tracey," Blaise said, smirking a bit. "She's grumpier than normal this morning, which is saying something as she's never been what you would call a morning person."

Tracey just grumbled incoherently. No one knew what she said, but Harry doubted it was pleasant.

"Tracey," Harry spoke with a slight sigh, catching the brunette Slytherin's attention. He reached into the potions belt he always kept on him these

days and pulled out a small vial filled with an amber colored liquid. "Drink this?"

"What is it?" asked Tracey as she reached out a hand and let Harry place the vial in her palm.

"It's called Invigorating Drought," Harry answered the girl as she studied the liquid contained within the vial. "It's a potion that boosts the energy level of the drinker. Normally, it gives you exactly eight hours of energy, but I felt that the effects were a bit too intense, so I modified it to merely give you a proper boost to wake up. This will help you wake up, but won't force you to remain one hundred percent alert for eight hours than make you crash after the effects wear off."

"Isn't that a fifth year potion?" asked an interested Blaise.

"Yes."

"Who cares what year of potion this is," Tracey gave a sleepy grin at Harry. "Have I ever told you how much I love you?"

"Only when I do something for you," Harry's response got several chuckles and giggles while Tracey tried to give him a pout. It didn't work very well considering she was still half asleep.

"Whatever," she mumbled before uncorking the bottle and downing the entire potion in one gulp. "Mmmm... tastes like... strawberries?" She looked at Harry questioningly, getting him to shrug. "Why does this taste so good? Aren't potions supposed to taste like crap?"

"Tracey..."

"Not listening."

"You'd be surprised to learn that most potions don't actually taste bad," Harry informed her, ignoring the small moment of bickering between Tracey and Hermione. He had gotten used to it by now. "In fact, most don't even have a flavor. Madam Pomfrey simply adds several non magical ingredients to any potion she concocts in order to make them taste foul. According to her, if the result of an injury is receiving a horrid

tasting potion, then you are less likely to get yourself injured in the first place."

"I can see her doing that," Hannah quipped, "Madam Pomfrey doesn't seem to enjoy it when children come in with injuries they got because they were doing something she thinks is, well, stupid. I remember one time I had to take Ernie to the Hospital Wing because he had accidentally burned his bottom because his wand was shoved into his back pocket and he sat on it. I could hear the yelling even after I left the hall."

A few chortles went around the group of friends at the image of Ernie getting his own backside burned by sitting on his wand.

"And she really didn't seem to like it whenever you came into her hospital after getting... injured." The blond Hufflepuff, along with the others in the group, shivered as they remembered the two incidents where Harry had been injured.

"That's true," Harry decided it may be a good idea to change the subject, "anyways, while her potions designed to heal injuries and the like will taste horrendous, most of her other potions like the pepperup and dreamless sleep have no flavor."

"Huh?" Tracey looked thoughtful for a moment, right before deciding to shrug off everything she had just been told. "You learn something new everyday."

As breakfast continued, Professor McGonagall eventually came up to the group.

"I have informed Albus of your desire to speak with the staff," she told Harry after catching his attention. "He has expressed an interest in hearing what you have to say and has agreed to allow you to meet with the staff and let us know of your... ideas."

As his friend's looked at Harry in confusion, the young boy in question allowed himself a small smile. Last year he had cemented his position within the school as one of it's model students. This year he would begin making waves.

"After the first month of the term has ended, we have a beginning of the term meeting on Saturday in order to discuss the new students and see how they are coping. The meeting will be after lunch at one o'clock in the afternoon and usually lasts for half an hour. You will be allowed to meet with us after the meeting at half past one."

"Thank you, Professor," Harry said with a grateful smile. The normally stern Head of Gryffindor House smiled back before leaving the rest of Harry's group to interrogate him.

"What was all that about?" asked the most vocal of the group. Harry turned to look at Tracey and gave her a mysterious smile.

"Just some ideas I had about certain changes to Hogwarts that I would like to discuss with the Professors."

The reaction his answer received were varied. It was clear most of his friends were a bit put off with his secrecy act. Tracey in particular was wrinkling her nose in clear distaste at his desire to be mysterious. Hannah and Terry looked a bit put out as well. On the other hand, both Blaise and Daphne were being very introspective and had taken to studying him with that gleam in their eyes that Harry recognized as 'Slytherin cunning'. The others all ranged in between those states of emotion.

"That's not really an answer, you know," Lisa Turpin pointed out with a bit of a pout. While not as expressive or vocal as the others, it was clear that she did not like his attempt at being mysterious and aloof either.

"Yeah," Hannah agreed, "couldn't you at least give us a little more than that?" she asked, with Susan nodding her head in agreement.

"Well," Harry's face took on a mock thoughtful look. "I suppose I could. Very well, I guess it wouldn't hurt to tell you guys a bit about what I wanted to discuss with the Hogwarts staff."

Everyone leaned in to hear what he had to say. It was clear they were all interested in what he had to say.

Daphne was the closest to him, and he noticed almost immediately that

she was so close to him that her arm and leg were lightly touching his. He did not make any comments or give any outward reaction to this, but he secretly felt a small thrill at how close she was.

"I'm sure a lot of you are aware of how the Houses are very segregated from each other?"

As several heads nodded, Tracey's face took on a look of confusion.

"Segregated?"

"It means isolated, Tracey," Daphne spoke absently.

"Well why didn't he just say that?"

"I did," Harry said dryly. Tracey huffed.

"Whatever."

"Anyways, while last year went a long way towards breaking down house barriers, it's still there," Harry continued. "One of the goals I have that I wish to accomplish before graduating from Hogwarts is the complete disassembling of house boundaries."

"The Four Hogwarts Houses will still exist," he added when he saw everyone's thoughts heading that way. "I just don't want the houses to be so divided from each other. Each house represents a small part of a greater whole."

"Gryffindor, for example, represents bravery and courage. Without the courage to face whatever adversity stand in their way, witches and wizards will never be able to progress. Hufflepuff, the house of hard work and loyalty holds equal importance. Even if you are brave enough to face whatever stands in your way, you will never be able to overcome it without hard work. And it is easier to overcome hardships when you have the help of others, yet if you cannot give your loyalty to someone else, how can you expect to receive loyalty in return? And what of knowledge? Neither of the traits these two houses embody will amount to anything without the knowledge to make informed decisions."

"In other words, Ravenclaw," Daphne said, causing Harry to nod and smile at her.

"Yes, Ravenclaw, the house of knowledge. Yet all the knowledge in the world will mean nothing if you lack the cunning and ambition to properly use that knowledge. Slytherin. When combined the four houses can create something far greater than the sum of their parts."

He could see the gears in his friend's heads turning. They were all thinking about what he had said, though once again he noticed a few who seemed to truly realize the implication of his words.

"At the same time, they also keep each other from overreaching their goals and failing, or worse, losing sight of those goals in their quest for power. Gryffindor and Hufflepuff balance each other out, while at the same time keep Slytherin in check. Slytherin and Ravenclaw do the same, but they also keep Gryffindor from acting recklessly stupid."

"If what you are saying is true," Hermione began tentatively as she tried to follow along the path of logic Harry was giving them. "Then that would mean Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw keep Slytherin from losing themselves to their ambition while Ravenclaw and Gryffindor ensure those in Hufflepuff are bolstered by the traits of their house."

"Yes," Harry nodded. "Hufflepuff is actually the house with the least negative aspects, but because of this, tend to be the most unnoticed. Though it would be more accurate to say Hufflepuff, Gryffindor and Ravenclaw keep Slytherin in check while Gryffindor, Ravenclaw and Slytherin help Hufflepuff shine. Despite Gryffindor and Slytherin being at odds with each other, it's actually Slytherin and Hufflepuff who are polar opposites when it comes to personality and house traits."

"Ugh," Tracey messaged her forehead. "All this talk of houses and checks and traits is giving me a headache."

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I present to you, Tracey Davis, the girl who enjoys keeping her brain as disengaged from the rest of her body as much possible."

Tracey shot her blond friend a hurt look.

"That harsh, Daph. Real harsh."

"Perhaps you should learn to use your head more," Daphne suggested dryly.

"I try, but it's just too hard to think of all this stuff. I do something than spend all day thinking about something."

"Which explains why you are constantly shoving your foot in your mouth," Daphne drawled. "You tend to speak without thinking."

"There's no need to put it so harshly," Tracey muttered into her goblet of pumpkin juice.

"Don't worry too much, Tracey," Harry told the girl kindly. "Daphne's just teasing, besides, you're more of a kinesthetic learner than a visual or auditory learner."

"A who's it's what now?"

"It means you learn through physical activity rather than listening to a lecture or studying notes that you read from a book," Hermione supplied. "It also known as tactile learning."

"That actually makes a lot of sense," Lisa said thoughtfully as she looked at her friend. "Tracey's never been very good at doing written assignments."

"Horrendous would be more like it."

"Oi!"

"But she is very good at practicals," Lisa continued speaking as if Daphne and Tracey had not interrupted her. "When ever we practice or are in class, she's always the first one to get a spell right after Harry, even though she doesn't seem to know the theory behind the spells themselves."

"What can I say?" Tracey buffed her nails on her school robes. "I'm awesome like that."

"I think you've been watching too many muggle cartoons," Hermione muttered, causing Tracey to look a tad sheepish.

"You can't deny those teles are really cool," Tracey defended herself as best she could. "I saw them when mum took me shopping in London. We were watching... um... the Animaniacs."

"That's actually a good show," Harry admitted, causing the others to look at him. "Lisa and I used to watch it a lot, though I haven't seen it since I started Hogwarts." He then looked over at Lisa and added, "my muggle friend Lisa, I mean. Lisa Crawft."

"I figured she was who you were talking about," Lisa smiled lightly. "I've never watched any of these... cartoons before."

"You know," Daphne shifted the conversation back to its original course. "You still haven't told us exactly *what* ideas you want to bring up to the Hogwarts staff."

"Hey, Daphne's right!" Tracey realized, blinking a bit before giving Harry a peeved look.

"You're not planning on telling us, are you?" asked Susan, perceptive as always. Harry was once again impressed by her deductive skills. He had seen them before, but it was still shocking to see just how good Susan was at reading between the lines. It was the kind of thing he expected more from Daphne than Susan.

"You're right, I don't," Harry raised a hand to forestall any outbursts. "As much as I'd like to think my ideas hold merit, others might not. There is a chance that none of the ideas I have will become reality unless I decide to become the Headmaster of Hogwarts at some point in the future, and I honestly don't know if that's a position I want to take up right now."

His friends seemed to understand where he was coming from, but still looked put out.

"Even *if* my ideas are deemed to have merit, they likely won't be implemented this year and possibly even the year after that. A lot of the many ideas I have in mind require a good deal of reformation of the

school curriculum and will take a lot of time and money to set up. I don't want to get anyone's hopes up that my ideas will be used when there is a good possibility they won't be, or at least will not be implemented for some time to come."

"I suppose that's fair," Hermione said, then gave him a pointed look with arms crossed. "Though I'd still like to know what you're going to be talking about."

"That's because you're a nosy busy body," Tracey said without thinking. When Hermione glared at her, the girl leaned back in her seat and quickly made to try and retract her words. "I mean, you're such an amazing, incredible, stupendously good friend that you want to... um... help Harry with his... uh... reforming and all that. Yeah, hehehehe..."

Daphne shook her head as the others did their best to hold in their laughter. Or not, as was the case with a chuckling Terry.

"And you wonder why I make fun of you all the time."

Tracey's shoulders slumped.

"Oh, shut up."

Ah, I just love the smell of reviews in the morning. Oh wait. It's night where I am right now. My bad. Anyways, I wanted to thank you guys once again. Last chapter I received 140 reviews. It's good to know you guys appreciate my work.

As always, don't be afraid to tell me what you think or what you want to see in this story. Also, do be sure to check out my blog. I know some people haven't, mainly because these people still ask questions I've already answered on my blog. Trust me, if you have a question, chances are it will be put up there if it isn't already.

Ideas of an Innovative Mind

Chapter 14: Ideas of an Innovative Mind

The first two weeks passed by incredibly quickly for Harry. Between his schooling, his friends, his exercising (which now involved a few of his friends), and his continued studying of alchemy, the young boy had his hands full. He could only imagine how busy he would become once he added Quidditch practice to the list. Thankfully, Oliver Wood had yet to make a move on that yet, which left Harry with a bit of free time.

Despite it being a Sunday morning, Harry woke up just as early as he usually did. That was the one problem with being a skilled Occlumens he found out. Because his mind was so organized and only needed the time that allotted towards restoring the bodies energy while at rest, he only needed four hours of sleep to feel completely rested.

This was both a good thing and a bad thing. It was good because it meant he had more time to work on his independent studies when all of his friends were still asleep. It was bad because it meant if he ever wanted to sleep in, he wouldn't be able to. Harry just had too much energy to sleep in and didn't like to waste his day by laying in bed like some kind of lemon.

Thus, even though the sun was just barely peeking out from the horizon, Harry found himself getting out of bed long before everyone else.

Since it was Sunday, no one else would be awake. Neville was busy dozing away on his bed and Harry knew that Hermione, Daphne and Susan would also be asleep at this time.

With his friend's all asleep and nothing else to do, Harry grabbed the spiral bound notebook with all his transmutation circle ideas and a calligraphy pen and made his way downstairs.

Sitting down in one of the easy chairs in the Gryffindor Common Room, Harry placed his spiral notebook on the table in front of him, drew out his

wand to start a fire in the fireplace. Then, after setting his wand down right next to his notebook, opened said notebook to the last page he had written in.

Drawn onto the pages were numerous transmutation circles. All of them held very similar designs with small variations here and there. The one concept that remained the same with all of them was that they were all using two of the Classical Elements: Fire and Air. It was Harry's hope that he would be able to create a transmutation circle that could cause the very air itself to combust and ignite.

Unfortunately, Harry had run into a bit of a problem. While it was true that air could, in the right circumstances, fan the flames as it were, air on it's own could not be ignited into a flame without aid. He also had to take into account changes in things like temperature, the level of moisture found in the air and changes in the direction of the wind. Harry wanted to build a Universal transmutation circle that would work anywhere, which meant he had to take all variables and shifts in atmospheric changes into account within the circle.

It was a daunting task to be sure. This would easily be one of his most complicated circles to date.

The sound of feet running downstairs at a pace that made Harry believe the person would trip over himself had him groaning as he set his quill down. This was one of those meetings he had been hoping to avoid for a while now, but it looked like he would no longer be able to put it off. What an incommodious turn of events.

"Hey, Harry! Morning! How are you?"

Collin Creevey came bounding down the stairs, almost tripping over the last few steps in his haste to reach his idol. As always, the boy was clutching his camera in both hands.

Harry had to wonder about that camera. He had yet to see Collin be parted from it. If he didn't know any better (which he didn't, he was just hoping his thoughts were incorrect), he would almost assume the boy slept with it. As things stood, the annoying child was practically married to the damn thing.

"Good morning, Collin," Harry barely managed to contain his annoyed sigh. It looked like he wouldn't be getting any more work done today. "Did you sleep well?"

"I slept great!" The boy said enthusiastically. "Those beds sure are something. My bed back home is nowhere near as comfortable. Do you think they use magic to make them so soft and whatnot?"

Actually, they did. Harry had read that all beds at Hogwarts had a number of comfort charms, including one charm that acted similar to a dreamless sleep potion, only, instead of putting someone to sleep for eight hours, it made them drowsy and ensured they would not wake until they were well rested or someone else woke them up.

Not that he cared enough to inform Collin that. If he did, the boy would probably become an even bigger fan of his after seeing how knowledgeable he was.

"So, so, Harry," Collin Creevey continued hopping up and down like a rabbit on a sugar high. "Do you think I could get that picture of you, huh, huh? You said you'd let me take a picture of you, so can I? Can I?"

It was a struggle for Harry not to grit his teeth. Between Collin and Lockhart, he was beginning to seriously contemplate murder as a possible method of ridding himself of these two nuisances permanently. Both of them were seriously beginning to fray on his patience.

Why was he even putting up with them again?

Oh. Right. Because he needed the sheep to think he actually cared about them. Sometimes, Harry really hated the fact that he had to keep up appearances. While in most instances, he didn't really have any problem helping and talking with those he did not consider friends, people like Collin and Lockhart, who seemed to not know the meaning of the words personal space and propriety made dealing with people he did not consider a friend very trying.

Harry wondered if Voldemort had to deal with this when he was at Hogwarts. If so, it was no wonder the man went insane and started murdering people left and right.

"Sure," Harry sighed as he closed his spiral bound note book and sealed it shut with a charm. Standing up, he looked over at Collin and thanked the sentience of magic that he was getting better at masking his irritation. "Let's take that picture."

"Alright! Come over here, Harry! Over here next to the window!"

Harry sighed as he trudged over to the window, thankful that everyone else was still asleep. It was bad enough that he was actually going through with this. He would never be able to withstand the humiliation of having people actually around to watch as he allowed what had to be his number one fanboy (after a certain House Elf) take a picture of him.

Or several pictures, which is what ended up happening. By the time the first year was satisfied that he had enough pictures, Harry was seeing spots in his eyes from all the flashes and could actually feel the urge to strangle the little brat come over him. Thankfully, he resisted.

Then again, maybe not. He was still on the fence about whether or not the whole 'murder Collin and Lockhart in their sleep and toss the bodies into the Forbidden Forest for the Acromantula to find' idea he had come up with had any merit.

"Wow! Thanks, Harry!" Collin said, beaming widely at him. Harry's smile twitched and he felt a vein throb on his forehead. "These pictures should be awesome once I get them animated. If you want, I can give you copies of them?"

"Sure, Collin," Harry sighed. Dealing with this boy was exhausting. "That would be..." His right eye twitched. "Nice."

"Okay! In that case, I'll see you later, Harry!"

Harry watched as Collin walked off. Closing his eyes, the young boy slumped back against the wall.

He had known that being a celebrity would be exhausting at some point. All last year he had been forced to put up with people talking and whispering about him behind his back. Every time he did something people would talk about it in conversation. The amount of rumors spread

about him were as numerous as the books made by that company he had sued and more seemed to be cropping up every day.

So yes, he knew that being famous would be difficult. He just didn't know how difficult. Last year, he had been able to put up with the sheep because all they did was whisper behind his back. It was easy to ignore people like that. This year, he was dealing with a fanboy in Collin and Lockhart trying to increase his own fame by getting close to him. Needless to say, those two were wearing his patience thinner than anything or anyone he had dealt with last year.

The sound of giggling caught his attention. Looking up, Harry groaned in complaint when he saw Hermione and Neville standing there on the staircase, grinning down at him with matching ear to ear grins.

"Not, a, word," Harry growled out as the two walked over to him.

"We didn't say anything," Neville said, still grinning. "Did we make any mention of Harry's newest and truest fan?"

Harry scowled at the boy, but was ignored.

"He may be Harry's newest fan, but I don't know about truest," Hermione decided to add her own ribbing of Harry's most recent problem. "I hear that Ginerva Weasley, the youngest Weasley sibling, has had a major crush on Harry for a number of years now. Rumor has it the girl is positively smitten with Harry here, but is too shy to say anything."

"I really hope that isn't true," Harry groaned. "I have enough on my plate to deal with that I don't want to have some girl stalking me like Collin and Lockhart do." There was also the fact that he was not interested in dating. And even if he was, the only people he would consider dating at the moment were those in his group of friends and Selene.

He had also thought about what it would be like to date Lisa Crawft, but that just opened up a whole other can of problems he did not want to deal with. The least of which was that until this summer, he had always thought of her as a sister.

"Let's just go down to breakfast," Harry suggested, no longer feeling like

dealing with these two as they poked fun of him acquiring a new fan. "I was thinking that since it's such a nice day, after we all eat, we could head out to the lake or something."

With luck, neither Creevey nor Lockhart would bother them there. Of course, knowing his luck they might, but one can always hope.

XoX

Since it was Sunday and they had finished all their homework the day before as was par the course, the group of friend's decided the spend the day outside. Despite the season being in the last vestiges of summer, the weather outside was relatively mild. A pleasant breeze was ruffling through the grassy field as they sat by the lake, ensuring that the sun hovering overhead did not bake them to much. There was a sparse covering of cirrus clouds painting the sky, making it look like exhaust fumes from those muggle planes that were used for shows had been practicing formation flying.

Sitting on the ground Blaise, Daphne, Hannah, Hermione, Lisa, Neville, Susan and Terry were snacking on the finger foods Harry had managed to convince the House Elfs to make (not that it took much convincing). Meanwhile, up in the air, Harry Potter and Tracey Davis were flying around on their brooms; Harry on his Nimbus 2001 and Tracey on her Nimbus 2000.

Of course, Tracey being Tracey, she was busier trying to convince Harry to let her fly his broom than actually fly her own. Thus, while Harry flew around in a lazy manner, occasionally doing loop-the-loops, Tracey was following him around, begging him to let her fly his broom.

"Come on, Harry," she pleaded for the sixth time. She tried giving him 'puppy eyes' in order to help convince him, but as he wasn't even looking at her, the technique wasn't all that effective. "Please let me try out your broom? Please, please, please?"

"You know I can't do that," Harry sighed, his patience beginning to fray a bit. "I didn't get to even fly this broom until today since I live in a muggle neighborhood so it still isn't broken in. You of all people should know that until the broom becomes used to my way of flying, no one else is

supposed to use it." He cast her an amused glance. "Unless you were hoping to break it in so it would be custom fit to you..."

"Curses," Tracey actually managed to make her voice sound slightly grungy. "Foiled again."

Harry snorted as he made a swift yank on his broom and rotated himself around so that he was moving backwards as he faced Tracey. "Tell you what, while I won't let you fly my broom, I will let you ride on the back while I fly. How does that sound?"

The way Tracey's eyes lit up almost made Harry regret making this compromise. Almost.

"Would you really?" she asked, her eyes actually shining. Harry wondered if it was some kind of accidental magic as he gave her a small nod. "Alright! You're so awesome, Harry!"

Harry played up her words by buffing his nails on his T-shirt. "I know."

Tracey rolled her eyes. "Don't get an overgrown head now."

As they set down on the ground, the others looked over at them.

"Are you two done flying?" asked Terry, before adding to Harry, "Or has Tracey finally managed to convince you to let her fly your broom?"

"Neither," Harry retorted before Tracey could make a comment. The brunette pouted at him, but he ignored her expression and scooted up further along the handle of his broom. "But since she wants to at least experiencing riding a Nimbus 2001, I figured I could let her ride backseat for a while."

"At this point, I'll take whatever I can get," Tracey sighed as she climbed onto the broom by grabbing Harry's shoulders and swinging her left leg over to the shaft, near the back of the broom head where the meticulously straightened twigs were. When she was fully straddling the broom, she snuggled herself against Harry's back and wrapped her arms tightly around his waist.

"I'm surprised you're letting her ride with you," Daphne had a smirk on her face and a glint in her eyes that did not bode well for Tracey. "She'll probably be the worst backseat driver imaginable."

"I could imagine that," Terry grinned before parroting his voice into a mock imitation of Tracey's. "That's not the correct way to handle a broom, Harry. You're supposed to do it like this."

Tracey's cheeks flushed red as she gave her two friends a mock glare. "Keep it up, you two. One of these days I'm going to get you. You won't know when and you won't know how, but one day, I will get my re—KYAH!"

Her words cut off by the scream that tore through her lips as the broom suddenly went from stationary to launching upwards faster than a muggle bullet fired by a gun. Tracey, shrieking in surprise, could do nothing more than tighten her hold on Harry as they ascended into the atmosphere at a pace that would put any non magical aircraft to shame.

Higher and higher the duo soared as the young, raven haired boy kept his broom pointed almost straight up to the point where Tracey was forced to hold on for dear life if she didn't want to fall. To those sitting underneath them, staring up, the pair were mere pinpricks in the sky. Even Hogwarts began to look smaller from where they were.

Eventually, Harry leveled them out once he had deemed them high enough.

"Harry!" Tracey's heaving breathing hit his ear as the girl tried to get over her panic at the sudden and unexpected acceleration into the atmosphere. "What the hell!?"

"What?" Harry asked innocently. It was probably a good thing he was not facing her or she would have definitely seen his grin. "I thought you enjoyed traveling fast?"

"It's not that I don't," Tracey retorted hotly, "Just give a girl a little warning next time. I damn near had a heart attack!"

"But that would have ruined the surprise."

"Ugh," Tracey groaned as she placed her cheek against his back. "You're beginning to sound like... well, a little like me, now that I think about it." It sounded like this depressed her. "That's so wrong."

"I did learn from the best," was the retort she got.

"You're having on with me, aren't you?" Though it sounded like a question, it really wasn't. "What is it with everyone always making fun of me."

"You mean like when you and the girls kept commenting on how stupid my method of getting on the Hogwarts Express was."

"Hey, I actually did think it was kinda cool," Tracey informed him. "It reminded me of one of those old muggle shows mum sometimes likes to watch, can't remember the name, but this guy rides a horse and jumps onto trains..."

"Indiana Jones?"

"That's it!" Tracey exclaimed excitedly before continuing, "Anyways, even though it was kinda cool, it was still really stupid."

"I know," Harry admitted. "It's about as stupid as opening your mouth and saying something insulting before you even realize what you're saying."

"Alright, alright," Tracey grumbled. "I get it, I tend to speak before I think. I actually know I have a problem with that, thank you very much. I don't need you telling me about it."

Harry gave a small shrug of his shoulders. "Just saying."

"Whatever."

Silence prevailed among the pair for a little while. Harry used the quiet to look out among the grounds of Hogwarts and the small village of Hogsmeade a little further down the mountain that the large, imposing castle turned school was situated on. It was a very picturesque scene, and one Harry wanted to commit to memory.

"This is nice," Tracey mumbled as she pulled herself even closer to Harry. Since she was wearing muggle clothes, he easily felt the gentle swell of her developing chest, but didn't let it affect him much. He was getting better at controlling his hormones.

"It is," Harry had to agree with her. There was something about riding on a broom, high above the ground with a girl cuddling against your back that was, well, he didn't want to say magical, but that was really the only term he could use to properly describe the feeling.

Of course, he didn't think Tracey was talking about the cuddling part. She was probably focused on how it felt to be in the air.

"You know, this is the first time we've ever been on our own," Tracey's arms tightened around his waist. "Whenever we've hung out, I've always been with Blaise or Lisa or Hermione. This is the first time it's just been you and me."

"It is, isn't it?" Harry commented idly. After actively searching through his memory, he knew she was right.

"Mmm," Tracey hummed a bit. She was much quieter for some reason now. Harry would have pondered this further, but her voice broke him out of his thoughts. "This is also much nicer than being in the library."

"Well, you do love flying," Harry said.

"I mean going outside by the lake," Tracey defended. Harry could almost feel the pout in her voice. "That damn crone is always glaring at us, and whenever we make so much as a peep, she's practically frothing at the mouth."

Harry frowned a bit as he thought about the problems he and his friends had with one Irma Pince, the Head Librarian at Hogwarts. Within the first few days of their showing up at the library, Madam Pince had already kicked them out at least twice for being too, in her words, unruly.

"We need a place where we can go without that old bat getting on our case," Tracey took the words right out of Harry's mouth. He couldn't help but agree with his friend. "Wouldn't it be awesome if we had some kind of

clubhouse or something?"

"It would certainly be better than having to go to the library every time we wanted to get together to do something," he said, "And it would allow us to do more than just study and talk. We could probably get a few games or something to play, or even use it for things that you're just not allowed to do at the library."

As surprising as it was, despite Hogwarts' size, there were not very many places for people to 'hang out' as the muggle slang went. You couldn't spend it in the corridors unless you wanted Filch on your case, the Great Hall was only open during meals, and House Common Rooms only allowed members of their House to enter.

Though Harry supposed anyone from any house *could* enter another house's common room, but there was an unspoken agreement that this was not allowed and so far, none of the students were willing to break it. Not even Harry, who was known for going against the grain and setting trends.

"You know, for someone who tends to speak before she thinks, you come up with some surprisingly good ideas."

"Just shut up and keep flying, Potter."

"Yes ma'am."

"And don't call me ma'am!"

XoX

Harry Potter was nervous. It wasn't something he felt very often and it certainly wasn't something he enjoyed feeling, but he would not deny that right now, he was having a bad case of jitters.

The reason for this was due to the meeting he would be having with the Hogwarts staff today after lunch, where he would present several of the ideas he felt would be more easily accepted. He had a large number of idea's he felt would improve the school, but a good deal of them were very progressive.

Those ones would be met with much resistance, if not from the staff than from the Board of Governors (and Lucius Malfoy in particular). He planned on getting them all implemented eventually, but it was best to start out small and work ones way up, rather than try to change everything at once and fail because people had selective hearing.

"Are you alright?"

Snapping out of his thoughts at the sound of Susan's voice, Harry turned his head to look at the red haired girl, sitting on his left side. She was staring at him with a concerned gaze, though her cheeks did heat up a bit when their eyes met.

"Of course," Harry smiled, ignoring the way his stomach rebelled at the blatant lie. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You haven't eaten your lunch," Susan pointed out, "You've always told us that it's important to eat during meals so that you have enough energy to last throughout the rest of the day." Harry nearly cursed as his own words were used against him. It was really annoying to be on the receiving end of, well, that. It didn't help that Susan was right. "Are you nervous about your meeting with the staff today?"

Harry sighed, knowing there was no point in lying. "I guess I am. Well, maybe not so much the meeting itself," he rubbed his jaw, "I guess I'm just afraid of the possibility that I might actually fail. This will be the first step I've truly taken to make an impact in the world."

"I would say suing several companies until they're nearly broke is making quite the impact," Blaise commented with an amused glint in his eyes.

"Perhaps impact isn't the right word," Harry made to correct himself. "Change would probably be better. If the staff and Headmaster agrees with my ideas, then a large number of changes will come to Hogwarts, which could very well last for centuries to come. That's a much bigger deal than suing several companies for every penny they're worth in my opinion."

"And you're afraid that your ideas won't be accepted?" Lisa asked as she too found herself absorbed in the small conversation between Harry and

Susan.

"Trolls? No problem. Death traps? Easy as pie to deal with. Throw a Dark Lord in his path and he confronts them head on. Set him up with a meeting between school staff and he caves," Tracey spoke with a grin. Well, she was grinning, until Hermione and Lisa both smacked her on the side of the head. "Owch!"

"You're not helping, Tracey," Hermione said with a sigh.

"Yeah, well, you didn't have to hit me," Tracey complained as she rubbed her head.

"Yes we did," Lisa retorted, "If we didn't, no one else would, and that definitely deserved a good smack."

"You're all horrible. I feel like I'm being used as everybody's punching bag."

"That's probably because you are being used as everybody's punching bag," Terry commented idly as he took a bite out of the bread on his plate.

"It was just a joke," Tracey muttered, before tossing Terry a glare. "And I don't want to hear that from someone who doesn't understand the meaning of fan loyalty."

"Just because I don't stick to rooting for a single Quidditch team, does not mean I'm not loyal," Terry defended himself. "My loyalty just happens to shift to whomever I feel has the greatest potential to win."

"That's exactly my point," Tracey stated as she began her rant on how one should always remain loyal to their favorite team. Everyone else pretty much ignored the two at that point.

From her spot across from Lisa, Hannah said, "I pity you for having to sit in between them."

"I pity myself," Lisa murmured, her shoulders slumping a bit as she let out a deep sigh. "You'd think they'd run out of topics to argue about."

"You should know by now that Tracey can argue about anything," Hermione commented, sounding amused than annoyed. Probably because Tracey was so busy arguing her point with Terry that neither of them were even aware of what the others around them were saying.

"True," Lisa conceded the point.

As the conversation around him flowed, Harry tried to use it as a means of levity for himself, hoping that some of the relaxed atmosphere would help him. It didn't. At this point, not even some of the meditation techniques he could use at a moments notice were working.

A hand slid across his palm and fingers threaded through his own. Looking to his right, Harry found himself staring into warm blue eyes.

"You'll do fine," Daphne told him reassuringly. "If you can speak in my father's presence without trouble, you can speak with the Hogwarts staff with ease. Remember, most of the staff aside from Professor Snape and Filch love you. And even Filch hasn't had anything bad to say about you yet."

Curiously enough, Harry felt himself calm down at Daphne's words. She was right. Despite the somewhat controversial ideas he would be presenting, a good deal of them he knew respected him as a model student if nothing else. And it wasn't like he didn't have allies, Professors McGonagall, Flitwick and Sprout held him in high regard. Even if they did not like his ideas, and he had no reason to suspect they didn't, they would at least hear him out and support him.

"Thank you," Harry whispered out of the corner of his mouth. Daphne gave him a small, half smile.

"Anytime."

Feeling better than he had a few seconds ago, Harry began to eat. Daphne let go of his hand and returned her attention to her food as well.

About halfway through lunch, Hedwig flew in through the window and landed in front of Harry, a letter attached to her left leg.

"Hey there, girl," Harry greeted as one hand went to brush the crest of feather's on top of her head while the other deftly undid the string to grab the letter. "Have a nice flight?"

Hoot.

"I'm glad. So who's the letter from?"

Hoot.

"Fine, don't tell me. I wonder if this is what Tracey feels when I'm being 'mysterious' as she calls it. I can see why she doesn't like it. It's kind of annoying."

Hoot!

"Just kidding, Hedwig. You know that."

"Does anyone else find it odd that he actually talks to his owl?" asked Tracey. On Lisa's opposite side, Terry raised his hand along with Hermione and Hannah.

"I think it's kind of cute," Susan said, then blushed as several eyes turned to her.

"You would," Hannah said with a fond smile that had Susan's red cheeks turning an even fiercer shade of the color.

Meanwhile, Harry had opened his letter after feeding Hedwig some bacon from his chicken club sandwich and was now reading the content. After a moment, he smiled.

"Good news, I take it?" asked Blaise.

"Some of the best kind," Harry agreed as Daphne leaned against his arm and shoulder to read the letter as well. He turned it slightly so that she could see it better before elaborating on his answer. "It's from Cassidy. She just got her licenses to sell potions and own a business. Now I just need to write a letter to the Goblins and have them buy out some property and we'll be in business."

That was not strictly true, there was still much work to be done. They would have to find a supplier for the potions ingredients, one for magical herbs and fungi and another for non plant based ingredients. A contract would also need to be written up and signed by both himself, Cassidy and an unbiased third party. But at least most of the legal work was now out of the way.

Thankfully, Harry already had the suppliers in mind thanks to last years Gala. He would just need to touch base with them and see if they were interested in supplying ingredients for his new business. And he didn't see why they wouldn't be. It was a very rare opportunity to be working with The-Boy-Who-Lived, never mind the heir to the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter.

The unbiased third party would, of course, be Andromeda Tonks, who really wasn't unbiased, but since no one knew that it wouldn't be much of a problem.

Besides, all her job was, was to make sure the contract did not favor one side over the other. It was a standard business practice and one she could perform as Harry had no intention of ripping off his business partners. That was just bad business.

"That's definitely good news," Blaise agreed with a nod, his eyes turning speculative. Harry could almost see the gears in the boy's head turning.

"It's about time for you to head out, Harry," Daphne informed him. Harry looked at the fading sign of a tempus spell that came from the blond witch's wand, which he saw read fifteen after one. He sighed.

"Right," he stood up, "I'll see you guys in a bit."

"We'll be at the new clubhouse," Tracey said excitedly, causing Harry to chuckle. After her inane comment about how cool it would be to have a place they could meet that wasn't the library, Harry had decided to commandeer one of the unused classrooms and turn it into the rough equivalent of a common room for him and his friends so they would have a place to spend time together without needing to travel to the library.

After saying his goodbyes to everyone, Harry walked swiftly towards the

Headmaster's office. While he had never been inside before, he had made it a point to travel there at least once just so he knew where it was in case of an emergency. As it was nearing a half past one, Harry came to a stop in front of the Gargoyle statue that guarded the entrance.

"Ever Lasting Gobstoppers."

As Harry watched the Gargoyle hop out of the way and a set of stairs that had previously been sunken into the floor raise up, he applauded the Headmaster's ingenuity on passwords. While most would find his choice of password unusual if not downright foolish, Harry was one of the ones who realized how difficult it would be for anyone to guess that choice of password. By using a non-magical candy as a password, he ensured that the vast majority of witches and wizards would not even know what it was due to their ignorance on non-magical culture, and most non magical children would never guess that a wizard Dumbledore's age would make a password like that.

Simply genius.

Walking down the stairs, Harry eventually reached a large, wooden door with a brass door knob on it. He made to knock on it —

"You may enter, Harry."

— When the voice of Albus Dumbledore called out. Harry blinked, trying to get over his surprise as he wondered how the Headmaster had been able to tell who it was. His mind ran through various theories and possibilities, including and up to: runes that allowed Dumbledore to sense magical signatures, Dumbledore being able to sense magical signatures without aid, alert runes and simple deductive reasoning (Dumbledore probable knew he was the only one who would be coming by at this time therefore deduced that the person at the door would be him). Each theory was plausible, though he would probably never know unless he asked.

Perhaps another time.

Entering the room, he was greeted with the sight of the entire staff of Hogwarts there. Really, that just meant all of the Professors were in attendance as well as Filch and his cat. Harry could see Professors

McGonagall, Sprout and Flitwick standing together as they conversed. Sinistra, the dark skinned beauty and Astronomy professor had her own little space while Vector and Babbling stood together in conversation and Professor Charity Burbage, the muggle studies professor, stood a bit away from the group. Even Trelawny had come down from her tower and was looking around the room goggly eyed with her big, round rimmed glasses. Meanwhile, Snape was skulking in a corner, looking like he would rather be anywhere than there.

The only professor not in attendance was Binns. This was not surprising. And of course, there was also...

"Harry, Harry, Harry, Harry." Harry flinched as Gilderoy Lockhart walked up to him with a large smile on his face. "Trying to make some more waves, are you? Wanting to get in on the action, eh? I can't say I blame you. It's an addicting feeling, isn't it?"

The urge to kill this man and hide his body became very strong, especially when he placed his hands on Harry's shoulders.

"I don't know what you're thinking," Lockhart whispered so that only he could hear what was being said. "But do try not to over extend yourself. Wanting to be famous is all well and good, but only if you can deal with everything that comes with it. Remember, Harry, fame is a very fickle friend."

"I'll do my best to remember that," Harry managed to grit out. Just grin and bare it, Harry. Grin and bare it.

Lockhart seemed to ignore the danger signs and beamed at him.

"That's all I can ask."

As the annoying man moved away and Harry stepped forward, the young Potter heir took a moment to center of himself. This was it. His biggest moment to date. The Gala had been a large stage to his entrance into wizarding politics and Hogwarts had set the precedence for how people would perceive him. This was where he would begin leaving his mark on the world.

He was beginning to hang out with Oliver too much. That mental speech sounded almost like one of his maniacal Quidditch Captain's speeches right before a big game.

"Mister Potter," Dumbledore spoke in a grandfatherly voice that managed to sound both intrigued and amused. That twinkle in his eyes also seemed to add to his presence. Harry wondered if it was a passive ability or something he made happen actively. "I have been told by Minerva that you wish to speak with myself and the rest of the staff about some ideas you had concerning Hogwarts."

Over in his little corner, Snape sneered, though he did not say anything. The man may hate him, but he was smart enough to know that speaking out right now would not earn him any points. And while he probably didn't care about being on the good side of the other Professors, even he knew not to earn their ire.

"I have several," Harry informed the Headmaster before launching himself straight into the speech he had prepared. "My first idea is to help with the proper integration of first generation witches and wizards into wizarding society."

"I'm sorry," Professor Vector interrupted for a moment, confusion showing on her face. "But what's a first generation?"

"First generation witches and wizards are magical children who were born to non magical parents," Harry answered her patiently. He knew there would be ample confusion at the new term he had decided to coin for 'muggleborns'. "I find that calling children born to non-magicals 'muggleborn' to be derogatory. It's in very poor taste and is nothing more than an attempt at ostracizing them from our society by the more aggressive pure-blood factions."

All of the Professors looked rather intrigued. Except for Lockhart who looked lost. And Snape, who was still scowling.

Trelawny didn't seem to be paying attention either, but she didn't even look like she was all there at the moment.

"I have decided to call them first generations because they are the first of

their family line," Harry continued. "All magical families had to start out somewhere. We didn't just spring up from the ground one day and proclaim ourselves pure-bloods. We weren't born from the ether as pure-blood families. All families at one point or another came from those who we have termed muggle. In that sense, the only difference families like my own possess is that we have been a family with magic for much longer than they have."

Almost all of the staff was nodding along with him. Again, Snape and Lockhart weren't, but the potions professor had at least stopped glaring at him and was now frowning with a creased brow.

"As all of you likely already know, many pure-bloods are of the belief that allowing first generation witches and wizards to fully integrate our society will destroy the traditions and customs our society has been founded upon for generations due to the new and dangerous ideas first generations bring with them from non-magical society."

Harry smiled as he saw all of them paying him rapt attention. Even Snape was no longer skulking, which could be considered an accomplishment in and of itself.

"And they are right, to a degree." The shocked looks on their faces as he stated his agreement with the pure-blood ideals was amusing. "The fact of the matter is, those of the first generation know nothing of our society. They come into our society, bringing with them the ideas and beliefs of the very world our ancestors separated us from almost 2,000 years ago at the start of the new calendar. And these ideas and beliefs they have often tend to clash with the ones our world is truly founded upon. They find the traditions we hold so dear unnecessary and in some cases barbaric. Thus, a good deal of them try to change our society and usually end up leaving when their attempts are blocked and they find themselves impeded from getting a job by the pure-blood factions who feel it their just punishment."

"However, it is not their fault that they do this," Harry continued passionately. He resisted the urge to pace, as pacing was a sign of anxiety, and instead clasped his hands behind his back like some kind of drill sergeant. "They do not understand our society, they don't know why

we do things the way we do them or why our laws are set up the way they are or even why our traditions have been upheld for well over a millennial. This is not the fault of the first generation. The fault lies with us," he gestured to himself and the others, "For not properly teaching them our ways and the reasons behind them."

"I believe it is important for those who came from a non-magical background to learn about our society before they graduate Hogwarts and are let loose in a world that they do not understand," Harry was finally getting to the crux of his first point. He had made his case, defended it with flawless logic and now it was time to bring it all home. "Which is why I believe that we should have a class that teaches first generation witches and wizards about Wizarding Societies customs, traditions and laws, as well as explains their reasons and purpose for existing."

There was a long silence as Harry finished the most important part of his speech. Now, like any good politician, he just needed to be patient and wait for them to start asking questions. There were always questions.

"Pardon me, Mr. Potter," it was not surprising to Harry that Professor Flitwick was the one who asked the first question. As a Ravenclaw, he valued knowledge above all else. "But, while I agree with you on your beliefs and reasons, I know for a fact that we already have a class that teaches customs and traditions."

"You are talking about Professor Binns class?" Harry asked for clarification. He received a nod, then said, "Professor Binns, History of Magic does indeed teach customs and traditions, but not until N.E.W.T. Year. I am sure a good deal of you have had that class, either when he was still alive or after he died, so you should understand why almost no one ever takes History of Magic for their N.E.W.T.s."

The chuckles he received let everyone know that his point was well taken. Even Professor Flitwick gave a snicker of his own as his point was thoroughly rebuffed.

"Aside from the fact that Binns is such a boring teacher that he puts most of my peers to sleep, History of Magic is a much more comprehensive

subject. It covers far more than just traditions and customs." Harry smiled as a few of the staff stifled their chuckles again. Professor McGonagall was trying to maintain a stern facade when she heard Harry's blatant insult towards a professor, but not even she could keep her lips from twitching. "What I am suggesting is a class that is strictly geared towards teaching those who are new to magic about our current customs, traditions and etiquette. We have a Muggle Studies Class that teaches witches and wizards about the non magical world. It only makes sense that we also have a class that teaches those who are new to magic about our world."

"And how would you go about making such a class?" asked Professor Burbage, who looked truly intrigued by the idea. Probably due to his mention of Muggle Studies. "Would it be an elective like mine?"

"Yes and no," Harry answered. "I believe that it should be mandatory for those who are new to magical society to learn our ways. It's important that they understand how our society works so they can function in it as productive members. That's why it should be mandatory for the first two years, which is where we would teach everyone the basics of our society so that they could at least gain a small understanding of it. After second year, we can make it an elective that students can decide to continue studying if they find an interest in learning more."

"While your idea is intriguing, even if we decided to add this class to our program, there will be a good deal of students who will not get the full benefits. Seventh years in particular, will be getting the short end of the straw in this case, as they only have this year left." Leave it to Flitwick to find a potential flaw in Harry's design. It was a good thing he already had an answer for him.

"Which is why for this first year this class is implemented, and perhaps even the year after that, instead of making it a class, we will start off with seminars for students of all grades to attend," Harry answered. The diminutive Professor smiled and nodded as he once more backed down after having his question answered.

"I believe we all find the idea to be very interesting, Mister Potter," the Headmaster spoke with his wizened voice. He was actually beaming a

smile at Harry. The young wizard didn't think he had ever seen the man so happy before. "I find myself intrigued by your proposal, and I can certainly see the benefit in adding it to our curriculum. It seems that in our desire to teach the next generation about magic, we neglected to inform those who would be taking their first steps in our world how to survive in magical society."

"Then you agree with my proposal?" asked Harry, perking up as he awaited the much older man's answer.

"I do indeed," Headmaster Dumbledore said. "Your idea will not only help first generation magical children adapt to our society better, but will also quell the vast majority of the hardliners who wish to keep those given the term muggleborn from making any headway in our society. There will, of course, be those who will continue to try and deny the newest members of our community their due," a frown marred the old man's face for a second. It was so quick, Harry could have almost sworn he was seeing things. "But I think that, with this idea, we have the beginnings of a new chapter for our world. One which I suspect will be much brighter than it would have been otherwise."

Harry felt a lot of his anxiety fade away. The tension in his upper and lower back relaxed, and for the first time since he woke up this morning, the young boy truly felt the weight he had been wearing lifted from his shoulders.

It was good to know that the Headmaster agreed with him. While the rest of the staff needed to also agree, everyone knew that Albus Dumbledore made the rules at Hogwarts. If he wanted to create a new class, he would. In the same manner, if he wanted to keep a new class from being created, he could. Having his support would make the process of creating a new class go much smoother.

"Now, this was a truly wonderful and innovative idea," Headmaster Dumbledore clasped his hands together in front of his face. Harry was reminded of an American cartoon he once watched called the Simpsons. Of course, with his grandfatherly smile and Gandalfish beard, the man before him was very different from one Montgomery Burns. "And I cannot help but wonder, do you have any other ideas you would like to share."

Harry's back quickly straightened as he pulled out a scroll from within his robes. "I do have a few more," he admitted, before allowing the rolled up scroll to unfurl across the floor.

The looks on everyone's faces when they saw the nearly five meters worth of parchment roll across the floor to the Headmaster's desk and only stop because there wasn't enough room for it to unfurl anymore was almost enough to make Harry lose his composure and laugh. Almost.

XoX

Dumbledore watched as the door closed behind Harry Potter with an expression of intrigue. Just when he was sure that he had figured the boy out, the Potter heir managed to come up with a number of proposals that truly surprised him. He had been impressed by the ideas that had been brought to them, especially when he considered how young the source was.

"What a truly intriguing bunch of ideas," Filius squeaked from where he stood. "I was most impressed by them. Particularly the one about First Generation witches and wizards." The tiny professor chortled. "And I have to admit, that name is rather catchy."

"It is as you say," Professor McGonagall agreed, a proud smile on her face. Albus knew exactly how she was feeling. Even though he knew he had no reason to be, he was very proud of Harry's well thought out ideas. They truly reflected the thoughts and feelings of the one who brought them to him and the other teachers.

"They were an excellent batch of ideas," Gilderoy agreed, before deciding to toot his own horn. "Of course, most of those were ideas I was telling him about whenever we spoke. The boy truly does seem to enjoy taking after me."

As the blond haired man chuckled, Dumbledore withheld a grimace. Had there been anyone else to take the Defense Against the Dark Arts position, he would have given it to them in a heart beat. For just a moment, he cursed Voldemort for placing that curse on the DADA position. It made finding someone competent for that job very difficult.

As in impossible.

"I really liked those ideas he had to help unify the school," Professor Sprout admitted with a smile. "He's already done quite a bit there, befriending people from each house. I'm impressed."

"I was impressed by his speech," Charity Burbage said. "It was very well thought out."

Albus agreed. It was clear to him that the boy had plans on going into politics, which had been obvious when news of him showing up at the New Year Gala last year made the front page, but it was really brought home today when Harry was speaking with them.

"Of course you would think that," Snape sneered at the other teachers. Albus noticed almost immediately that his heart wasn't really in it at the moment. Harry's passion was so similar to Lily's back when they were children that it must have left him befuddled. "Am I the only one who sees the boy for the troublemaker that he really is?"

"The only one who goes around making trouble, Severus, is your student, Draco Malfoy," Professor McGonagall retorted, causing the Potions Master to scowl.

"I too have found myself very impressed with young, Mister Potter's ideas," Albus said, peering at those within the room over his moon rimmed glasses. "Tell me, do any of you feel these ideas are doable? Or are there reasons why any of you feel we can't impliment them?"

He eyed each of his staff, judging their positions. When his eyes landed on Severus, he saw the man look away and couldn't quite contain his smile. That was as good as consent when it came to him.

When no one spoke out against any of the idea's Harry had presented them with, he turned to look at Minerva, who straightened up and smoothed out her robes.

"I believe that all of them are doable," she stated. "However, some of them will take some time to actually implement. A number of them we will not be able to bring about this year, though we should be able to fully

implement a good deal of them next year."

"And what of the lessons on wizarding culture, traditions and laws?" asked Albus. While the others he felt could be shelved for a later time, this was the one he actually felt had the most potential and should be implemented as soon as possible.

"That one we can do this year," Minerva stated. "I can hold once a week seminars every Saturday for one hour. We'll make it mandatory for all First Generation students and allow Second Generation students and above to join the lesson should they so desire. This will allow us to ensure that no one feels they are being treated unfairly, or that the first generation is getting more special lessons."

"Then that is what we shall do," Albus clapped his hands, signaling an end to the meeting. "Now, since this meeting has gone on for far longer than I expected it to, let us adjourn and continue this another day."

The others agreed and soon began filing out one by one. He could tell all of them were rather excited by some of the ideas presented.

Not that he could blame them. He was just as if not more excited than they were. The idea of teaching magical children who came from non magical backgrounds about their world was something that should have occurred to him, but for some reason never did. It was an innovative idea, and one that would go along way towards easing the newly minted First Generation magicals into their society.

A change was coming, not just to Hogwarts, but quite possibly to the entire wizarding world. And Albus Dumbledore could not help but think that Harry Potter would be at the head of it, leading the charge.

What an intriguing young boy.

I would like to thank those of you who reviewed. 120 reviews isn't bad.

Be sure to let me know what you think of this chapter, thoughts, comments, ideas, cries for help because your brains are being

eaten out by Cheerleader Zombies. Don't hesitate to leave a review before heading out.

Also, be sure to check out my blog. The link is on my profile and will answer all of your questions, including the eternal debate about what's better: The Wand or The Log.

A Most Unusual Detention

Chapter 15: A Most Unusual Detention

Exactly one week after his meeting with the Hogwarts staff, Harry was still waiting to see if any of his ideas and proposals had been accepted. He was certain that at least some of them would be, but given how long it had been since the proposal, doubt was beginning to creep up on him.

What if they had decided none of his ideas were feasible? Or what if they simply couldn't afford to? What if they didn't have the manpower or resources for such a thing?

Why oh why did he not think about the logistics that would be involved in many of his ideas? You'd think someone with eidetic memory would always be able to think of every possible variable. Alas, that was not the case.

Harry knew this was not a good way to think. Many of his ideas would take a lot of time and work to implement. Even if they decided to use some of them, it probably wouldn't be happening for another few months if not next year.

That didn't mean that he liked the idea of waiting that long.

"Something wrong, Harry?"

Sighing into his bowl of oatmeal with blueberries and sliced apples, Harry looked up to his left to see Susan staring at him with inquisitiveness and concern. He gave her a wan smile. "I'm fine. Just a little anxious, I guess."

"About that meeting you had with the staff?"

"Yes," Harry frowned. "I had hoped at least one of my ideas would have been implemented by now. I suppose it's too much to ask for though. Many of them would take a lot of time to work out the logistics behind,

and a good deal would require a lot of the Hogwarts schooling system to be changed."

"Give it time," Susan smiled at him, her cheeks only flushing a tad. She was getting much better at talking to him recently. Harry thought it was because of the close proximity they shared when exercising.

That, or it could have had something to do with their clothing. Because, let's face it, when you see someone every morning wearing the kind of outfit Susan and Daphne exercise in or the kind of clothes Harry wore, something like talking to someone just doesn't invoke as powerful a reaction.

"Thanks," he smiled at her, then chuckled as her cheeks finally flared a bit and she went back to eating to hide her growing blush. Well, even if some things between them had changed, it's nice to see that a few things remained the same.

Before Harry could get back to his own meal, he felt the person on his right scoot closer to him, close enough that their thighs were touching. He looked over to see Daphne Greengrass sitting next to him, eating her meal with poise and elegance as if she had not just scooted several inches closer to him. A confused frown crossed his face.

This had been going on for some time now. Whenever he got closer to one of the other girls in their group, Susan especially, Daphne would do something subtle to get closer to him.

Truth be told, he didn't mind her doing it. He actually kind of liked it, the closeness that is, but it did make him wonder. Why was she doing it? Was she jealous perhaps? Or maybe she just wanted to be physically closer to him? Perhaps she needed some reassurance that just because he was closer to Susan than before didn't mean he cared about her any less?

Harry didn't know. He didn't have any of the answers to any of those questions. Girls were confusing at the best of times, and downright impossible to understand at the worst of times. Even he, who had the benefit of being best friends with a girl since he was seven, did not understand them very well.

He decided not to think about Daphne's unusual behavior. If there was something wrong, he would find out eventually. Until then, he would just continue acting like he always did.

As he began eating again, he let the conversation of his friend's flow over him.

"...It's a lot easier now that I managed to get a muggle telescope," Terry was saying to Hermione as the two of them spoke about the boy's most passionate subject; Astronomy. "The view is much clearer than the ones wizards use."

"Maybe I should think about getting one than," Hermione mused. "I was having trouble identifying the stars in Orions Belt the other night. They all looked the same, but I know they're supposed to have slight variations in color and intensity."

"Do you guys always have to talk about your school work first thing in the morning," came the plead from one Tracey Davis. "I get enough of a headache listening to our teacher's lecture in class. I don't want to hear it from my friends too."

"If you don't like what we're talking about, why don't you just not listen to us?" suggested Terry with an uncaring attitude. Harry sensed a fight brewing. "It's not our fault you don't like listening to us talk about what we like."

"It's hard to ignore you guys when you're sitting right next to me," Tracey stated dryly, her words soon devolving into an argument between her and Terry.

Sitting between them, Hermione Granger sighed and pulled out one of Lockhart's books to read. Harry shook his head. He still didn't know how a girl who was so intelligent could possibly find enjoyment in those books.

"Hey, Harry?"

"Hmm?" Harry looked up at Blaise. "Yes?"

"Did that girl you're writing to get a shop yet?"

"You mean Cassidy?" at Blaise's nod, Harry said, "Yes, the Goblins managed to get us a good deal on a shop at Hogsmeade. There had been an vacant piece of property there that we managed to buy for a cheap price." He shrugged. "It needs to be fixed up, but I've already managed to hire contractors to come in and help fix the store up and build it to my specifications."

"Hogsmeade, huh?"

"Yep," Harry said, popping the p at the end. "Hogsmeade doesn't have a potion shop, but everybody needs potion ingredients. Especially students who may end up botching there potions and need to buy more for themselves. I figured if I opened a shop there, students third year and above could travel there for their ingredients and buy some of the potions I'll have available that takes their fancy and they might not be able to get elsewhere for a cheaper price. I also plan on having an order by Owl post system where people can order potions and have it delivered to them. That way, people won't need to go all the way here to buy potions."

"That makes sense." The boy said, nodding. "Anyways, I spoke with my mum about your potions shop that you're trying to open," he spoke slowly, casually, but with a hint of ambition in his voice. Once more, Harry could see the gears turning in the boy's head.

"I take it your mother is interested in a partnership of some kind?"

"Something like that," Blaise smirked. "The Zabini family owns many businesses. One of them is the shipping of magical ingredients like dragon blood, Eye of Newt and other non plant based ingredients. Mum was interested when I mentioned you were making a potion shop and said she may be able to cut you a good deal on potion ingredients."

"I see," Harry looked thoughtful for a moment. "Send a letter to your mother telling her I'm interested and would like to speak with her in more detail." He already had two people who were interesting in delivering non-herbological ingredients, but if he could get a better deal with Celestina Zabini than all the better.

"I'll do that."

As breakfast continued, Professor McGonagall, who had been eating at the staff table this morning, stood up from her seat and made her way to the front of the small staircase that separated the fifth table from those of the Four Houses.

"I have an important announcement to make," the stern teacher announced. Her voice was very loud, booming even. Harry suspected she was using the Sonorus Charm to increase the volume of her voice. It was very effective in quieting down the students. "This Saturday at exactly one o'clock, a seminar will be held on pure-blood customs and traditions. This seminar is mandatory for all Muggle... First Generation witches and wizards. That is to say, all those who come from a non magical background must attend."

Harry found himself smiling as he saw that one of his proposals, and by far his most important idea, was being put into effect. It pleased him to know end to know that those in charge recognized his idea as being a good one. It meant that, despite his age, they saw him as, if not an equal, then someone who had the potential to eventually stand on even footing with them.

At least, he hoped that's what it meant. He did not know how much more he could take of adults treating him like a child. Maybe he was just sick of it because of Nicolas Flamel's constant use of calling him boy.

"Those who do have a magical background also have the option of attending, though whether you do is at your discretion."

As a wave of mutterings swept through the crowd, Harry focused some of his magic to his ears to enhance it as he tried to hone in on individual conversations. It was important to know what the sheep thought of this, seeing as they were what made up the majority of the world.

Meanwhile, Professor McGonagall continued speaking. "Also, there are several clubs that will be available for you to join if you wish it. Those who wish to join will need to inform their Heads of House to sign up. There will be more information on this soon, which will be posted on the Hogwarts Board in front of the Great Hall."

"For those of you who wish to create their own club, please be sure to

Speak with your Head of House in order to get approval. You will also need to find a teacher who will sponsor your club, as well as help create a list of rules and regulations to ensure the safety of those students who may wish to join."

Without preamble, Professor McGonagall sat back down and the Great Hall erupted into excited chatter. Harry quickly withdrew the magic from his ear as the noise became too loud. He had no desire to let his ear drums burst due to carelessness.

"Are these the ideas you spoke with the staff about?" asked the ever inquisitive Hermione.

"Some of them," Harry admitted. "I had a lot more. Those three were just the easiest to implement."

"They're actually pretty good ideas," she said. "I'm actually excited about that seminar. There seems to be so much about the Wizarding World that I don't know about."

"That's because most of the knowledge on traditions and customs can't be found in books," Daphne informed her. "A lot of traditions are passed down through word of mouth. It's very rare to find a book on something like that."

"But why?" asked Hermione, "It would be much easier for muggle-borns to blend in if they knew more about the magical world."

"First Generations," Harry corrected absently as he set the spoon down in his empty bowl. "They're called First Generations, and it would be easier for them, which is exactly why they don't do it."

Hermione frowned. "I'm not sure I understand."

"It's because a number of pure-blood's, especially those who belong to the darker factions, do not want... First Generations gaining a foothold in their world," Daphne explained for Harry. She looked at him from the corner of her eyes and saw him smiling at her for using the new term he coined for muggle-borns. She smiled, just a bit. "There are a number of pure-blood's, like Lucius Malfoy and Yaxley, who fear being kicked out of

what they deem is their rightful place if they allow those who are not born of magical blood to gain a foothold in their world."

"And at the same time they complain about how those who do not come from magical families are trying to change their most sacred traditions by bringing in non magical ideas," Harry added. "It's a vicious cycle. On the one hand, they don't want to lose the high positions they have grown so comfortable in. On the other, they don't want First Generation magicals to change their societies ways by bringing in 'strange muggle ideas'."

"So basically, they want to have their cake and eat it too," Hermione added with a touch of anger.

"Yes, that's it exactly," Daphne nodded. "Of course, it's a bit more complicated than that. They are not just saying one thing and doing nothing to help. They are saying that witches and wizards born of non-magical families will change their ways, and are purposefully doing nothing to help those witches and wizards understand there world because they fear losing the power they enjoy lording over everyone else."

"What they fail to understand is that our society can't afford to cut out those who are born from non-magical families," Harry said. "I don't know how many of you know this, but a large number of once prominent pure-blood have gone extinct. Not just within the last few decades, but slowly, over the course of several thousand years."

"I know what you're talking about," Lisa joined into the conversation. "A lot of pure-blood families like the Appelswidth, Codginsons, Gaunts, Nightshades and Peverells, along with many other families, two hundred and sixty five I think, have been dying out over the past fifteen hundred years." Lisa looked thoughtful. "The History books were always unclear about just why these families died out, only that they did. Though I do know a number of them were killed off in various wars."

"That is one of the reasons," Harry said, "But there are a good deal more. Some were killed off by rival houses. Others were destroyed by accidents. I know a good few ended up being wiped off the face of the map by World War II, when Britain was bombed by German Forces."

"However, there is another reason, one that the Noble Houses don't want anyone knowing about."

"What is it?" asked Tracey, who, despite not being the studious sort, could not help but get pulled into their conversation.

"Inbreeding," said Blaise. Harry nodded.

"Right. Inbreeding. It shouldn't come as a shock to some of you, but most pure-blood families, and Noble Houses in particular, are all interrelated in some way. In fact, Daphne, Neville and Susan are all related to each in some way."

"Neville is actually my third cousin," Daphne added with Neville nodding in agreement.

"They do this under the misguided belief that by marrying into other pure-blood families, they can keep their magical blood from being tainted. The Gaunts were actually so paranoid about keeping their blood pure that they ended up breeding themselves into extinction. Brothers married sisters and daughters married fathers. Eventually, it led to them breeding their own magic right out of them. The last thing I remember about the Gaunts was that by the time their family line ended, the once Noble family who was said to have been related to Salazar Slytherin himself were practically squibs."

"That's disgusting," Hermione wrinkled her nose.

"It is," Harry agreed. "And it's something I hope to change. If the pure-blood factions keep marrying into interrelated houses, eventually they will all be tied so closely together that they'll end up breeding their own magic out of them. It might be a couple hundred years from now, maybe even a thousand, but it will happen eventually. Already the number of squibs born to magical households has increased by 16% of what it was two decades ago. That right there should have been a warning for most, but people are stubborn, and it's difficult to change several generations worth of people believing the only way to save their families magic is to keep it in the family."

Conversation quieted after that as the group grew introspective. Even

Tracey was looking thoughtful as she slowly chewed on a bagel. Harry Potter allowed his own mind to wander as he thought on what they spoke of.

It would be difficult to change people's beliefs about First Generation magicals, especially those who were considered dark. That was why Harry had suggested teaching about pure-blood traditions and customs. It was his hope that by learning more about the magical world and their reasons for why certain laws existed that, those who came from non-magical backgrounds would understand why it was important to not try and bring about drastic changes.

There would be those who opposed him, of course. People like Lucius Malfoy would not approve of what he was doing, but that was fine with him. Nothing worth doing was ever easy. And Harry did always love to face off against a challenging opponent.

XoX

It was early in the morning that Harry found himself practicing Quidditch Drills with the rest of the team. As had become the case since the second week of school, Oliver Wood had shown his fanaticism by making everyone in the team get up at the crack of dawn in order to begin training for Quidditch. Most of the team had groaned and moaned on their way to the locker rooms where they would get changed and ready.

Harry was very thankful he had already been awake at that time, having been about to head out with Neville and Hermione to exercise with them. He had been forced to leave the two and had asked them to inform Daphne and Susan about his absence and the reason why. He was sure they would understand.

Another thing to be thankful for was that Wood was only forcing them to do Quidditch practice three times a week instead of the traditional five. This was due in part to the fact that they had already proven themselves last year when they won the Quidditch Cup, but it was mostly because Angelina, Alicia and Katie had finally put their foot down and threatened their crazy captain with unimaginable amounts of pain if he forced them to practice five times a week.

Women, especially when teamed up together, could be downright frightening.

"Harry!"

Jerking the handle of his broom stick, Harry's body rotated along an axis. At the same time, his left hand shot out and snatched the Quaffle and tucked it under his arm as he completed rotation.

"Katie!"

Acting swiftly, Harry tossed the Quaffle towards Katie Bell, who caught it rather easily. He watched as she shot forward ahead of himself and the other two Chasers. Alicia came up behind her while he and Angelina moved off to the side to provide interference.

Meanwhile, Katie had just gotten within reach of the goal post. Wood was acting as the keeper for this practice session. Harry could see the man's face set in a mask of concentration, his eyes glinting as he stared unerringly at Katie as she flew in. At the last second, just as it looked like she was about to shoot a goal, Katie dropped the Quaffle, allowing Alicia to swoop down, grab it and toss it in the goal on the left.

Oliver, who had been prepared for Katie's shot, was left unprepared for when Alicia threw the Quaffle in the hoop opposite of where Katie looked like she was about throw her shot. The Quaffle went through the hoop, marking another successful play by them.

"Not bad, you lot," Oliver looked a tad miffed that he had missed the ball. Actually, he looked almost furious with himself. At the same time, he looked very proud of them for being able to sneak a shot passed him. "Just a few more drills and we're done for the day."

A chorus if groans met his words. No one aside from Wood wanted to be out there, practicing anymore. And while Harry did not groan with the rest of them, he did believe he had better things to do than practice drills he had gotten so good at that they were ingrained in his muscle memory. Things like looking at Daphne and Susan in their work out clothes.

Practice lasted for another half an hour before the fanatical Quidditch

captain was satisfied. By the time practice was over, it was almost 8:00. They had missed breakfast.

Deciding he would get some food from the kitchens, Harry made his way into the Quidditch Locker rooms with the rest of his team, listening as they chatted away.

"I say, old chap. It looked like you were losing your touch out there."

"What are you talking about? I was beating that bludger black and blue. Are you sure you weren't looking in a mirror."

"No, no, it was definitely you I was looking at. Everyone knows that I am the more handsome twin."

"Says you. How can you be more handsome than my glorious self?"

Fred and George were cracking jokes, as always.

"Did you guys hear about how Draco Malfoy tried to get on the Slytherin Team?"

And the girls were gossiping.

"I heard he tried to buy his way on the team," Angelina was saying, "But they didn't even give him a second glance before kicking him to the curve."

Katie shook her head, "I guess money can't buy everything."

Harry smiled and wondered if he should tell them that Malfoy originally tried to buy his way onto the team by having his father buy the entire Slytherin Team brand new Nimbus 2001s. It had only been thanks to the negotiations he had been going through with Nimbus Broom Racing Company at the time that he had found out about this and told them not to let sell the brooms to Lucius unless it was the specially minted, limited edition brooms. Basically, they were Nimbus 2001s, but with his signature etched on the shaft of the broom in golden cursive.

Naturally, the moment Lucius had been shown the brooms, he rejected

them in disgust. Harry still felt a small thrill at one upping the man again, even if said man did not know he had been purposefully one upped.

After setting down his broom, removing his Quidditch robes, folding them up and putting them back into the locker, Harry, clad in the under armor that came with the robes, made his way to the showers where he took a quick moment to rinse and clean himself off in steaming hot water.

He could have gone back to the Gryffindor Common Room, but felt it would take far too long to get there for his liking. Besides, the kitchens were on the first floor. If he wanted to get something to eat and not be late for class, then he needed to rinse off down here.

By the time he got out of the shower and was dressed in his school robes most everybody else was gone. Only Katie Bell remained, surprising, since she usually stuck with the other two Chasers. She must have used the girl's shower on the other side and gotten changed while I was cleaning off because her hair was still wet. Had she been waiting for him?

"Something on your mind, Katie?" asked Harry as he walked up to the girl. He knew her schedule. She had Care of Magical Creatures this morning, so it was likely she wasn't going to be heading back up to the castle without a good reason.

"I just wanted to say good job with practice today," Katie smiled at him. Harry could not help but find her smile very attractive. She did not possess the regal beauty of Daphne or the endearing shyness of Susan, but that was not to say the girl did not have her own attractiveness.

Thanks to all the training Wood put them through, Katie was quite possibly one of the most athletic girls their age. Her body was lithe and slender, her legs powerful and toned and her backside... by the age of magic he'd never seen a more athletic looking butt in his entire life.

Which may have had something to do with the fact that he had only seen a few rear ends in his life, but he doubted there were many females near his age who could claim to have such a fine backside as Katie Bell.

Add her athletic frame with her wavy, sandy blond hair and doe-like eyes and you had a girl who was already turning heads. She was just that

pretty. Harry knew from listening in on a few of the older students conversation that a number of them planned on asking Katie to go to Hogsmeade with them now that she was old enough to go.

"Thank you," Harry eased into his own smile. Katie was not really one of his friends, that is to say she was not in what he liked to call his inner circle, the friends he trusted the most, but he did enjoy her presence, and it wasn't just because his hormones were whispering to him about what it would be like if he kissed her. "You did exemplary as well."

Katie giggled, likely at his use of a more complex word to say something that had many easier words to use. That was why Tracey often laughed at him. At least until she was put down by Daphne, Hermione or himself.

"Listen," she said after she ceased her giggles. "I heard that you know where the kitchens are."

"I do," Harry frowned a bit as he wondered where she had heard that, but shrugged it off a second later. She had likely been told by the twins, who seemed to know far more than they should.

"I was wondering if you wanted to walk with me to the kitchens to grab a bite to eat then?" Katie asked, still smiling. "We missed breakfast, and I don't know about you, but I'm famished."

Harry thought about her request for a moment, before quickly deciding that it would be a good idea. This would give him a chance to get to know one of his teammates a bit better, and give him an acquaintance with one of the older members of his house. Only a fool would turn down an ally.

"I wouldn't mind walking with you at all," Harry held his arm out for her to take. It wasn't really needed for something so simple, there were no politics to be had here and therefore no need for pure-blood etiquette, but he had read a book that said girls enjoyed men who were chivalrous.

Her smile widening, Katie took the proffered arm and began engaging him in conversation as they walked together towards the kitchens.

XoX

Friday afternoon on the second week of October was the day Snape had finally decided to give Harry detention.

Like always when they had Potions, Harry and his friends had split up into pairs and sat at their respective tables as class got started. Harry had found a permanent partner in Daphne Greengrass. Tracey and Hermione also paired up more often than not, and Blaise and Neville seemed to have found themselves sticking together when it came to Potions class.

Harry had to admit the pairs made sense. Daphne Greengrass' weakest subject was potions, while it was surprisingly Harry's best subject after Defense Against the Dark Arts and tied with Charms and Transfiguration. He could help her where others couldn't, and in turn she kept Snape off his back simply by being paired with him.

Not only could Snape not afford to take points without seeming biased, but he couldn't try to sabotage Harry's work without doing the same to Daphne's and possibly running afoul Lord Greengrass in the process should he ever find out about the sabotage attempts. It was a very mutually beneficial pairing, and he was sure that was one of the reasons Daphne had agreed to work with him.

Sitting several tables away from them, Tracey and Hermione worked rather flawlessly together. Hermione was very precise with her work and able to meticulously add ingredients to their cauldron and stir it to the exact degree.

On the opposite side of the coin was Tracey, who was very good at all things practical. She was not as precise as Hermione, but she had deft hands and could easily cut, chop, slice or crush any of the ingredients needed with less hassle than the bushy haired witch that she was partnered with. They made a great pair.

Blaise and Neville were working behind Harry. He knew those two wouldn't have any problems, even though Neville was still frightened of Snape. The round faced Gryffindor was the best Herbologist among them, and so long as he had Blaise's help, his confidence would keep from flagging, allowing him to work any potion ingredient made from a

plant with ease.

Unlike Neville, whose talents in Herbology were at the level of a prodigy, Blaise excelled in actually brewing the potion. His movements were calm and sure as he added ingredients to the brew and stirred. He also knew a lot about the non Herbological ingredients and would often be the one handling items like Eye of Newt, Salamander Tails and the like. Similar to Hermione and Tracey, they were good at different aspects of potion making, thus making them a good team.

The potion Snape was having them brew was called Hair Raising Potion. Essentially, it was the potion that caused the drinkers hair to stand on end. Harry felt it was a useless potion, but supposed it was to be expected for a class that was still at a beginners level when it came to brewing.

It was a relatively simple potion to make, requiring only one thirty-two minutes. As always, Harry's skill at being able to remember all of the complex reaction of every potion ingredients when mixed with any other ingredient was unmatched. He and Daphne were able to brew a perfect Hair Raising potion within fifteen minutes after cutting down the time it took by seventeen.

After putting the potion within two vials, one just in case Snape's hand slipped, and adding an impervious charm to each (because Harry was just that paranoid), Harry walked up to Snape's desk and placed one of the vials on it.

Before Harry could even think of leaving, Snape called out to him.

"Hold up, Mister Potter."

Turning around, Harry found Snape glaring at him with his usual sneer. "Can I help you, Professor?" he asked in a mild voice. Best not stir up the hornets nest right now.

"Yes... I will be expecting you to stay after class today for your detention," Snape's voice was loud enough that Draco Malfoy and his ilk could hear. Harry took a deep breath as Draco's snickers, Crabbe and Goyle's stupid guffaws, Theodore Nott's insane giggling and Pansy Parkinson's

obnoxious laughter. It wouldn't do to get angry, especially since he knew they had detention with Lockhart, if they had not already had it.

"Of course. Is that all Professor?"

"No, it's not all," Snape's sneer gained an extra edge. "This... potion, took a much shorter time for you to make than the instructions say."

Harry remained silent, knowing that interrupting the man would just result in him losing House Points and getting in more trouble.

"In order to make sure you didn't do something stupid like make the wrong potion, I'll need you to test it to see if it actually does what it's suppose to do."

Snape handed the vial back to Harry, who frowned a bit before downing half the vial. Mere seconds after downing the potion, Harry's hair shot up, defying gravity. Snape scowled at him and rudely gestured for the raven haired youth to sit back down.

Doing just that, Harry sat back in his place next to Daphne, who looked at him with a questioning raise to one of her delicate eyebrows. He looked at her for a second, then shook his head, causing her to nod before going back to writing something on a scroll.

Harry spent the rest of his class doing mostly breathing exercises. He knew that he would need to remain as calm as possible for the next few hours while with Snape. The man would no doubt try and rile him up so that he could take points off and just for his own amusement.

He wondered what the man would say if the greasy haired potions professor knew that Harry was simply using him as an exercise in self control. He would probably get angrier.

During one of his exercises, which involved conjuring images of an ocean shore in his head, Daphne leaned into him so that they could speak without being overheard. "What did Snape want?" her question was whispered into his ear, bringing with it the hot expelling of her breath.

"You mean aside from insulting me in front of our class?" asked Harry, a

wry smile touching his lips.

"Yes, aside from that."

Harry shrugged. "Let's just say it looks like I won't be leaving this room any time soon."

Daphne was smart enough to read between the lines and understand what he was saying. She grabbed his hand and held it in her own as a show of support, then moved back into her upright posture, their hands still connected under the table. Harry decided he liked the feel of her hand in his, so he did nothing and merely returned the gesture.

One by one students came up to Snape's desk and handed in their assignments. Harry shook his head as he watched the Potions Master berate all the Gryffindor students he could while praising the Slytherin students. Even Crabbe and Goyle were praised, and their potion looked more like a puke green instead of the light lime green that it was supposed to be.

The only Gryffindors who did not get berated were Hermione and Neville, which may have had something to do with the fact that they were partnered with Blaise and Tracey, who were the ones to bring up the potion. Watching Snape's face as he accepted the potions was very amusing. It looked like the man had swallowed something very sour.

Finally, class ended and everyone began packing their things up and getting ready to move out.

"Good luck," Daphne whispered, gracing him with one of her lovelier smiles before walking over to the other four members of their little group. Harry could not hear what they said due to the noise blocking it out, but it looked like she was proceeding to explain why he would not be heading to the clubhouse with them. The looks of pity and disappointment he was getting only served as confirmation.

Only a few minutes after class ended, the room had been emptied save for Snape and Harry. The Potions Professor gave him a bemused frown, as if he was not quite sure of something, then began speaking. "For your punishment, you are going to clean out all of the cauldrons by hand. The

use of cleaning spells is prohibited."

Thus began Harry's punishment. Cleaning the cauldrons was a very tedious task. It required more than just a bit of effort, especially since Snape would not accept anything less than perfection.

It didn't help that the stains looked like they had been building up since the school started. Harry knew this was why Snape had waited so long to give him detention. He had wanted to build up the grease and potion ingredients inside of the cauldron so they would be harder to clean. It was extremely petty and childish, but that was Snape for you.

Thankfully, Harry had a way of making the task easier. Snape had said that the use of spells was prohibited, but he had said nothing of magic in general. And unlike most witches and wizards who didn't have a lick of talent in the art of wandless magic, that was where Harry felt he really shined.

No spell was actually used during the cleaning process, but Harry did inject a good deal of his magic into the rags he had been given for the task, molding his magic so that it had slightly acidic properties towards anything that was not human skin or pewter.

"Tell me, Mister Potter, what is the other name for Ice Potion, what are its effects and how do you make it?"

Harry almost startled at the question. He had been expecting Snape to speak up eventually, but he had been expecting insults and comments on how arrogant his father was, not questions on potions.

Despite this, he answered dutifully. "Ice Potion is also known as Fire Protection Potion. As the name suggests, it's used to allow someone to move unscathed through flames after ingested and provides protection against most magical fires except for Dark Magic like Fiendfire. It is made by slicing two bursting mushrooms, adding them to the cauldron and then stirring clockwise until the potion turns blue. Then adding two table spoons of Salamanders blood to the cauldron and stirring counterclockwise until the potion turns green. Finally, crushed Wartcap powder is added to the cauldron. After the crushing the Wartcap in a pestle, add it to the cauldron and stir clockwise again until the cauldron

turns red."

"And what if I were to add Ashwinder eggs?"

"It would depend on when you add it. If you added it any time before adding the Salamander's blood, the potion would explode if they were unfrozen and turn a pale yellow if they were frozen, as well as ruin the potion. If you added it to the potion after putting in the Salamanders blood, it would enhance the potion enough that the one ingesting it could theoretically withstand Fiendfire. Of course, since no one has ever tried testing this out, no one knows if it is actually possible to withstand Fiendfire once the Ice Potion has been drunk."

"What is the difference between Pepperup Potion and Pepperup Elixir?"

And this was how Harry spent his time at detention with Snape. The Potions Master would stare him down with those bottomless black eyes, asking him questions about potions that seemed to increase in difficulty after each time asked. Whenever Harry got a question wrong (like when Snape asked him how to brew Felix Filicis, which Harry had not even thought about trying to brew yet), he would say "Tut, tut. Looks like you're letting your fame to go your head" and then proceed to give him the answer and inform him about how he should have known that. By the time Snape dismissed him, Harry was fairly sure that most of the questions near the end were around NEWT level.

As Harry began making his way out of the dungeons and towards the Great Hall where his friends would be, seeing as it was time for dinner, a thoughtful frown marred his face.

Detention with Snape had been nothing like he expected. There had been no insults thrown, no sneers sent his way (though Snape did have a pretty mean glare). The greasy haired man had not even made one mention of his father or how Harry was an attention seeking brat just like James Potter. If Harry did not know any better, he would have said whoever was in there was an imposter under Polyjuice Potion.

Shaking his head, Harry hurried his pace towards the Great Hall. He had no desire to try and work out the motivations behind the greasy haired Potion Master's strange behavior. There could be no doubt that he would

probably lose his sanity just trying.

It wasn't until he made it to the ground floor and was nearly two thirds of the way to the Great Hall when he was halted in his tracks. A cold, bone chilling voice that caused the hair on Harry's neck to stand on end and his fight or flight senses to scream at him echoed around him.

"Come . . . come to me. . . . Let me rip you. . . . Let me tear you. . . . Let me kill you. . . ."

Eyes widening, Harry spun around, trying to find the source of the voice. It was impossible. Aside from the fact that he was in a hall and there were only two ways to look down, the voice seemed to be coming from everywhere. It echoed along the walls, bounced down the corridor. No matter how many times he turned about, he could not find the source of the haunting voice.

Green eyes narrowed as the young boy walked over to one of the walls. Perhaps the reason he could not find the source was because it wasn't inside the corridor, but inside the walls?

He placed a hand upon large bricks, frowning in concentration. Extending his senses, Harry tried to see if he couldn't discover the location of whatever had spoken. For nearly a full minute he stayed there, facing the wall, his hand pressed upon it and magic exuding from his fingertips. It was only after a good deal of time had passed that he withdrew his hand with a sigh.

Whatever had been there had left now. Or perhaps it had never been near him in the first place. These halls tended to leave an echo. For all he knew, the sound could have traveled from several dozen meters away.

Shaking his head, Harry decided not to worry about this for right now. If something came up later on, he would do something, but until that time came, there was no sense in worrying himself to death.

Beginning his walk once more, Harry set a brisk pace towards the Great Hall. No doubt his friends were all wondering where he was, and he wanted to get a good meal in before dinner ended.

Thank you everyone, for reviewing this story. 134 reviews this time. You guys are totally awesome.

Please be sure to keep it up, especially if you have something important to tell me, like, anything you would like to see in future chapters, complaints about my story, or you have the answer as to whether or not Chuck Norris really did star as The Force in the original Star Wars Trilogy. That last one is super important.

Also, do not forget to check out my blog. My Q&A for this chapter will be posted on there on Sunday.

A Feast with Friends

Chapter 16: A Feast With Friends

Albus Dumbledore sat behind his desk, studying several sheets of parchment. Each sheet contained information that would be necessary if he wanted to have that class on pure-blood etiquette, laws and traditions up and running by next year.

One sheet contained a long list of names of people who were knowledgeable about pure-blood traditions and etiquette and did not have any discrimination towards muggleborns, or First Generations, as Harry had dubbed them. There were over 50 individuals on that list, though several names stood out in prominence: Andromeda Tonks, Beatrix Shafiq and Phelix Fawley just to name a few. If he were to get someone to teach a class such as this, they would be the best ones for the job.

The other sheets contained mostly logistics. A lot went into making a new class. He would first need to decide upon a classroom and have it refurbished. After he found someone to teach the class, they would need to decide on pay and Dumbledore would have to see about getting them their own room in the castle.

He also needed to decide on class material. There were no books on wizarding culture and etiquette. Pure-blood fear and paranoia had ensured that. But without books to study from, learning about pure-blood ways would be much harder as it meant all students would have to go off of to learn were the lectures imparted by the teacher.

This was on top of the proposal he written up and sent to the Board of Governors. Many of them, he knew, would actually be intrigued by the idea, especially when they learned of who it came from. At the same time, many of those people who would be intrigued were easily swayed to change sides. If Lucius Malfoy decided to, he could put pressure on the other members and force them to go against the idea.

Dumbledore would prefer to get the Board of Governors on his side with as little hassle as possible, but even if Lucius decided to try and force the others into compliance with his demands, for a proposal like this, Albus Dumbledore was more than willing to use his own strong arm politics to convince them to let this class be created.

Technically speaking, he didn't actually need the Board of Governors to agree with him. They didn't really have any choice in what classes he could create within the Hogwarts curriculum. Their job was solely to ensure that Hogwarts education was meeting the high standards set for them. As one of the premiere schools of magic, it was important that they remained the best.

The only other idea of Harry's that they had determined was feasible at the moment was the creation of various school clubs. At the moment, there were no real clubs unless one counted Professor Burbage's Muggle Studies club, which was really just a get together with her and her students as they made food the muggle way and read various books written by muggles. And Dumbledore couldn't honestly call that a club.

School clubs, according to Harry, were student-based school organizations, consisting of administration-approved organizations functioning with myriads of tasks, varying on the specific purpose of each respective club. Clubs composed of students, with adults as advising figures to maintain the functionality of clubs.

Basically, it meant they were clubs that would focus on a specific subject and would be run by the students, but they would have a teacher acting as a faculty adviser to help ensure the club was running smoothly.

There had been several clubs that Harry himself had suggested; a Dueling Club, an Arithmancy Club, a Runes Club, a Sports Club (that was not Quidditch) and a Debate Club (whose purpose was to allow people to have an intellectual conversation on a variety of school and non school related subjects), among several others. Dumbledore was not sure how many of those they could do (They only had so many teachers and a teacher could only advise one club before the work load became too much), but he had to admit that he was interested in the Sports and Debate Clubs, and Filius had been very interested in the idea of a

Dueling Club.

And Harry was not the only one who had brought suggestions upon Minerva's speech several days ago. Dean Thomas had come to her with the desire to create a Soccer Club, Lilith Moon had asked Severus if making a knitting club would be possible, and Justin Finch-Fletchley had told Pamona that they should make a Comic Book Club. Many of the students from all Houses and all grades had ideas for Clubs and there were no where near enough teachers to administer them all.

While this may have increased the work load for them, Dumbledore was actually pleased to see so many students were willing to pour out there ideas. It did his heart good to see such enthusiasm among the young.

The wards connected to his office caused his senses to prickle. The hair on the back of his neck rose. Someone had just set foot on the staircase.

"Enter!" He called out just a second before whoever was there could knock. He always found it amusing how people reacted when he revealed that he knew they were there before they could knock. It had taken him a number of years to practice getting the timing down, especially since different people held different gaits. These days, he was so good that he could literally tell who was coming to him most of the time simply by the amount of time it took before they could knock on the door.

The door opened and in walked a man that Dumbledore knew very well. His mood soured slightly at the sight of the blond haired wizards entering his office with an air of arrogance and conceit, the cane in the man's hand tapping against the ground.

He did not show this, however, instead putting on a jovial smile as he greeted the pure-blood. "Ah! Lucius, what a pleasant surprise! Would you care for a lemon drop?"

He watched with his amusement expertly concealed as the man in question sent a disgusted look towards the muggle candies in the bowl on his desk. It was always a sight to see some of the more staunch supporters of pure-blood policies looking at something created by the non magical populace in such disgust.

"No... thank you," Lucius sniffed, his tone barely masking his derision.

"I see, that's too bad," Dumbledore popped one of the lemony sweets into his mouth. "I have always been rather fond of lemon drops. Such wonderful treats. They never cease to make me feel better after a hard days work."

"I am not here to talk about your lemon drops, Dumbledore," Lucius did not show it outwardly, but Albus could see the slight narrowing of the man's eyes and way his shoulders stiffened that showed his annoyance.

"And what did you come to talk about?"

"This proposal of yours," Lucius tossed a sheet of parchment on the table. Albus picked it up and nearly chuckled when he saw what it was. "This new... class, you wish to make. I have a lot of... concerns about it."

"Oh?" So Lucius was going to try and be subtle about expressing why he felt the class should not exist. That was fine. "I do not see anything wrong with this class. It would be beneficial for those who are just now entering our world to learn how it works. That way they do not, what's the word I am looking for? Ah yes, we wouldn't want them trying to change our ways by bringing in dangerous muggle ideas." Lucius eye twitched. Good.

"This will go a long way towards helping keep those who are new to our society from trying to destroy our way of life inadvertantly."

"That is all well and good, Dumbledore," Lucius almost sneered. It was a close thing. "But I am still concerned."

So he wanted to be stubborn? Very well then. Dumbledore could play this game just as well as Lucius Malfoy could. And he had well over six decades of practice at it.

"And what concerns do you have?"

"I am concerned about the displeasure that may be voiced over this." Ah, he was trying to play the concerned for what others might think card. "If the muggleborns —"

"First Generations."

Lucius blinked, clearly startled by being interrupted. "Excuse me?"

"The young man who came up with the idea has taken to calling witches and wizards born with non-magical backgrounds, First Generations," Dumbledore smiled pleasantly at the man. "It's such a catchy name that I fear it has gotten rather popular among my staff."

The way Lucius' mouth thinned made it evident he did not feel the same way. Still, the man was not a political shark for nothing. He kept his disgust to a minimum.

"An interesting name," he sniffed. "Still, my point stands, many of the old families are going to express concern about what this means for them when news leaks out that you have created a class for the..." A twitch. "First Generations to learn our ways."

"Thank you very much for your concern," Dumbledore smiled jovial to hide his growing pleasure at seeing the man before him trying to maintain his composure. "But you do not need to worry. We encourage all magical children regardless of blood status to attend these classes. Naturally, we cannot force all children to attend as some may feel it's unnecessary, but we have managed to convince a number of students who come from pure-blood families to attend the seminars we have started."

"Seminars?" Dumbledore bit the inside of his cheek when he saw the shocked expression on Lucius Malfoy's face. Had he not done that, he may have very well laughed in the man's face. Lucius schooled his expression quickly, however, though it did little to hide his displeasure at this new information. "I had not realized you were giving out seminars."

"We felt it would be prudent to give seminars as a testing ground to see if students were receptive to the idea of pure-blood etiquette classes," maybe he was enjoying this too much. Dumbledore couldn't remember the last time he'd had so much fun at another's expense. That it was Lucius Malfoy, a man who he felt actually deserved to get sent to Azkaban, made it all the better. "So far, it seems to be a great success."

"I see," Lucius grit his teeth to keep calm. "There is nothing I can do to convince you to change your mind is there? You are set on doing this?"

"Of course," Dumbledore replied brightly. The response only served to anger Lucius further. "It was an excellent idea. One I am ashamed to say I never thought of before."

"Then I suppose there is nothing left to discuss," Lucius turned on his heels very abruptly and marched towards the door. He stopped just as he reached the door and turned his head. "Do be careful about making such decisions in the future, Dumbledore, or you may end up biting off more than you can chew."

As the door to his office slammed closed behind Lucius Malfoy's departing back, Albus Dumbledore leaned back and finally let out a couple of chuckles.

He really did have too much fun riling the blond haired pure-blood up. Then again, how often did someone actually get to pull one over on Lucius Malfoy like this? Albus didn't think anyone would blame him for finding what entertainment he could.

Calming down, the Headmaster of Hogwarts finally got back to work. Classes didn't create themselves, after all.

XoX

As he sat on the couch, reading over the parchment that was held in his hand, Harry Potter frowned ever so slightly. As his eyes scanned over the page, his mind was cross referencing all the information he had ever read on the subject he was reading about now, checking it not only for accuracy, but also to make sure all the information was there.

The couch he was sitting on was one of two long couches located in what Tracey had affectionately dubbed 'The Clubhouse'. It was, in essence, one of the many unused classrooms within Hogwarts. Harry and his friends had simply decided to commandeer it for their own use and converted it into something that very much resembled a house common room.

All of the tables, desks and stools that had been located in The Clubroom had been taken out and Harry had then used his skills in alchemy to turn them into other types of furniture, which had then been placed around the

room in a design that was both practical and aesthetically pleasing to the eye.

Really, Harry mused, he would make a good interior decorator.

On one side of The Clubroom was a large bookshelf. It was mostly empty at the moment, but Harry planned on adding several books he felt his friends might like as well as bringing a few muggle games because he was sure some of them would appreciate the ability to play a game that didn't explode in their face.

In the center of the room and slightly to the left most side was where the sitting area was, which contained two long couches that could easily seat four people and two lounge chairs on opposite ends of each other all of which were surrounding a long, wooden coffee table where they could put their work on. A fire place sat embedded into the wall behind the lounge chair on the far left and there was currently a fire crackling merrily away.

This particular classroom as located in what could be considered neutral territory, as all four of the house common rooms were within equal walking distance from it.

"Your writing is very concise and organized," he said to Daphne, who was sitting right next to him on the couch, watching him as he went over her potions essay. "And all the information you have is correct, however, there is a lot missing. Snape wants a one and a half foot essay. Right now, you only have one foot. To get that extra half a foot, you may want to add some of the general history behind the potion near the beginning. Basically, aside from simply telling us what it is and what it does, tell us when it was made, who made it and why they made it."

Setting the parchment down on the table, Harry brought out his wand. The runes along the shaft glowed very briefly as he tapped the tip of his wand against the parchment. When he did, the words that had been written began to crawl down until the last line of the last paragraph was at the bottom of the page and there was a large space available for Daphne to write in at the beginning just after she explains what the potion was.

"That's a very handy spell," Daphne said appreciatively as she took the

calligraphy pen Harry had bought her awhile back. All of their friends agreed that they were much better than using quills to write with. Less hassle, and less chance of making a mess too.

"I can teach it to you if you'd like," Harry told her as she began writing. "It's not in any of the required school books, which is a shame because it's so useful when writing essays, but it's still a very simple spell to learn. It only requires one wand movement."

"You don't use wand movements though."

Harry looked up at Terry for a moment, before shrugging. "That's because I don't need them. I've long since come to learn that wand movements are largely unnecessary for those who are in tune with their own magic, and I've been consciously using wandless magic for years now. However, most people can't cast a spell without the wand movements, just as they can't cast a spell without the incantation. It takes too much mental focus for a good portion of witches and wizards to do."

"So you're saying that I could learn to cast like you can?" Terry looked intrigued by the prospect, excited even.

"With practice, yes," Harry leaned back against the couch and crossed his arms. "However, it will still take years of practice. I am able to cast like this because I've been casting magic without a wand for years now. Adding the wand simply makes casting and directing spells that much easier. Still," he tilted his head to the side in thought. "I would say that with at least four or five years of practice, you could learn to cast most of the spells you know and will eventually learn here without the need for the wand movements or incantation."

Terry bit his thumb, a thoughtful look on his face. Knowing his friend like he did, Harry assumed the dark haired boy was wondering how to start learning to cast magic without incantations and wand movements.

"I would suggest learning how to cast without an incantation first." Terry looked up at Harry. "Learning to cast silent spells is easier than learning to ignore the wand movements. All it takes is a good deal of mental concentration and fortitude. The wand movements, on the other hand, require either an innate understanding of your own magic or an above

NEWT level understanding of Arithmency. Both of those take a good deal of time to learn."

"Ugh, I guess I'll stick to silent casting then." Terry gave Harry a slightly pleading look. "Any helpful advice would be appreciated."

"Well," Harry drew out the word in order to buy him time to think of the best method of explaining how to cast silently. "The key to casting silently isn't not casting without the incantation, but casting without speaking the incantation. That may not sound like much, but there is a big difference between the two. Casting silently basically requires you to 'think' the incantation. This is difficult for many reasons, the biggest being that visualization is very important to successfully casting a spell. If you're trying to 'think' your incantation, then your mind is not being used to visualizing the spell. This is why concentration and fortitude are required. You must learn to split your thought process so that you can think your incantation *while* visualizing the spell at the same time."

"Ha..." Terry slumped into his seat, rubbing his face. "That sounds needlessly complicated."

"It certainly can be," Harry agreed. "This is why most witches and wizards don't bother with silent casting except for those few spells they have learned so well that their magic already knows how to cast them without the incantation, which requires years of having cast that same spell over and over again. It takes too much time and too much effort."

"And most witches and wizards are very lazy," Daphne drawled as she finished up her essay. Setting down her calligraphy pen, she cast Harry an amused smirk. "Right?"

Harry grinned. "Pretty much."

"Yeah, all that magic jargon is really awesome and all," Tracey interrupted the pair, "But could you guys just stop talking about that crap so Harry can help me with my homework?"

"Do you ever get tired of putting your foot in your mouth?" asked Terry.

"Do you ever get tired of being a jerk?" Tracey snapped back.

"Not this again," Daphne pinched the bridge of her nose. "And neither Hermione or Lisa are here to stop them."

Harry's lips twitched at Daphne's exasperation. Without really thinking about it, his hand slipped into hers as he focused his attention on the soon to be arguing duo. "I don't have a problem helping you with your homework," he said to Tracey, making her face brighten like the sun. "But Terry does have a point, you know? You may want to tone the whole 'speak before you think' down a bit. I think you're actually getting worse."

"Ugh," Tracey flinched as if struck, then her shoulders slumped. "I know, I know! It's just... I can't help it! Blame all those muggle cartoons I watch."

"Putting the blame on something else. That's just like you."

"Shut up, Boot!"

"Make me."

"Oh, I'll make you alright! I'm gonna —"

"Why don't you show me what you've managed to get done on your essay so far," Harry interrupted. He didn't think the situation would turn violent, but it was best to keep the two from going at each others throats verbally, if not physically.

"Ah, well..." Tracey's face suddenly gained a slight red hue along her cheeks as she scratched the back of her head sheepishly.

Harry deadpanned. "You don't have anything written, do you?"

Tracey shrunk in on herself. "I'm not very good at writing this stuff, okay?"

Harry gave a long suffering sigh. This girl really was something else. She learned spells almost as fast as he did, but give her something that required her to think more deeply than 'make this wand movement, point and say this' and she was useless.

"Which essay are you writing?" he finally asked.

"Charms," Tracey murmured.

"Alright then. Let's see, if I'm not mistaken, that would mean you are writing an essay on the *Arresto Momentum* spell, which I'm actually kind of surprised you don't know more about, seeing how it was made by Daisy Pennifold to bewitch the Quaffle so Chasers didn't have to constantly fly to the ground to retrieve it..."

Harry quickly set about helping Tracey the best way he knew how, providing small bits and pieces of the most intriguing but ultimately useless information, and asking Tracey questions that forced her to work through the essay on her own. It was a tried and true method for helping people like Tracey, who excelled in all things practical and floundered like a mermaid out of water in all things theoretical.

Within less than twenty minutes, she was finished and all that was left to do was go over the mistakes, which Tracey would probably get Hermione to help her with since she knew how much the book loving girl enjoyed being helpful.

Speak of the Devil and she shall appear. Harry looked up at the doorway just in time to see Hermione entering the clubroom with Blaise, Lisa and Hannah, all of whom looked like they were just getting back from Professor McGonagall's first lecture on pure-blood etiquette.

And they had brought someone else. Traveling along with them, slightly behind and to the left of Lisa, was a younger looking girl (a first year most likely) with long, waist length sandy blond hair and large gray eyes that looked slightly misted over, as if she were seeing things that were invisible to everyone else.

She also, Harry noted bemusedly, had a very strange sense of fashion. Aside from her wand being tucked behind her ear, an unusual place to put a wand, she was wearing what Harry recognized as a butterbear cork necklace and strange earrings dangling from her ears that looked like they were made from some kind of fruit.

"Look whose finally come back," Tracey grinned at the group as they walked over to the gathering of lounge chairs and couches, all of which had been made by Harry via alchemy. "How was that lecture? Was it as

boring as I thought it would be?"

"For your information, it was very informative," Hermione sniffed as she sat down next to Tracey. "Professor McGonagall gave us a lot of important knowledge to help people who don't know much about the wizarding world when they graduate Hogwarts and it was only her first lecture. I can't wait to see what else she has to teach."

"Yeah, whatever. I'm sure it was super awesome... awesome enough to put me to sleep."

"You don't need to be so sarcastic, you know," Hermione rolled her eyes before they landed on the parchment sitting in front of Tracey. "Is that your Charms essay?"

"It is. Wanna read it over?"

"... Give it here."

As Hermione began going over the brunette Slytherin's essay, Harry looked over at Blaise who had just sat down next to a diligently studying Neville. "So what did you think of Professor McGonagall's lesson?"

"It was a good starter lesson for people who are just learning about our culture," Blaise rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "But it's also clear that her knowledge is a little outdated. There were a few inconsistencies when she spoke of certain laws that were repealed or adapted in the past few years." He shrugged and pulled out a sheet of parchment and a calligraphy pen from the bag he set down at his feet. "Still, it should be enough for most people."

Harry nodded. Basically, he was saying that while McGonagall was an okay teacher, it was only for those who weren't seriously considering going into something like law or politics. That meant Professor Dumbledore would have to find someone who would be willing to teach that class within a year or two if he wanted it to make a difference by the time Harry graduated from Hogwarts.

It was just too bad Harry didn't have any authority to hire teachers, much less make choices like create a new class. All he had were suggestions.

"So..." Harry turned to the new girl that was sitting very close to Lisa, looking about the room with inquisitive, slightly dreamy eyes. "You're Luna Lovegood, aren't you?"

"Yes," even Luna's voice sounded dreamy, as if she were literally miles away. How odd. "And you're Harry Potter."

"I am. It's nice to meet you," Harry held out his hand, waiting for her to take it.

She didn't.

"I am very impressed," she said in a tone of admiration. "You and your friends are surprisingly free of Nargles."

A loud groan from Hermione, who had actually stopped looking over Tracey's essay just so she could do that, prompted a raised eyebrow from Harry. He looked back at Luna, a question on his lips. "What's a Nargle?"

He would soon find out how wrong it was to ask that question.

"You don't know?" Luna Lovegood seemed genuinely shocked. Her eyes were opened wide in surprise and her mouth had dropped a little to reveal pearly white teeth. She promptly went into a lecture mode that almost reminded him of Hermione, only with dreamy eyes instead of analytical ones and a misty voice instead of a stern 'teacher' voice. "Nargles are devious little things. They like to steal things and are very mischievous. That's why I wear these Dirigible plum earrings and my necklace." She pointed out both items. "They help keep the Nargles away."

"I see..." Harry really didn't see. He had never heard of these Nargles. Then again, he had also not bothered reading up on magical animals, so his ignorance could be excused.

"I could make you one if you want," Luna offered. When Harry just stared at her, she added, "A butterbear cork necklace that is, so that you can keep the Nargles away as well."

"That would be... nice," Harry said diplomatically. He didn't really want one, but it would be incredibly rude to deny the girl, especially when she was looking at him with those large, gray eyes of hers.

It was the right thing to say because Luna beamed at him a second later.

"There's no such thing as Nargles... it's a completely make believe creature..."

"You say something?" Tracey turned to look at Hermione, who had stopped reading the essay and was now staring off blankly at the desk, her lips moving near silently.

Hermione twitched, then got back to reading. "No. I didn't say anything. You must be hearing things. Now stop interrupting me so I can finish reading your essay."

"Alright, alright, no need to bite my head off. Yeesh."

XoX

Harry Potter woke up one Thursday morning the same way he did every day. He greeted his Gryffindor friends with a smile and conversation, then the three of them made their way to the Great Hall where they met up with Daphne and Susan. There wasn't any Quidditch practice today, so he had been able to join them.

Much like how he woke up, the exercise routine went the same way it always did. He did get a few stares from Daphne and Susan, but beyond that, nothing out of the ordinary happened.

Breakfast and classes followed through the same way they always did. Harry had Defense Against the Dark Arts first that day, which had become something of a joke among his friends. Only Hermione and Tracey took anything the fraud known as Gilderoy Lockhart. After lunch was Charms, then Herbology, followed by Transfiguration, and finally dinner. That was how his day would normal would go and it all went off without a hitch.

Except that today, was not a normal day.

"And remember," Professor McGonagall began as the bell to class rang and all of the students stood up and made to file out of her room. "I want a one and a half page essay on how to transfigure a Beetle into a Button turned in by next Tuesday." Several groans chorused out amongst the students, but no one argued with her. They knew better than to deny the stern Head of Gryffindor House.

"I'll see you guys a little later," Harry said to his friends, Hermione, Lisa, Neville and Terry.

"You're not heading to dinner?" asked Terry.

"I have some things I need to take care of," Harry said. His four friends frowned, clearly remembering what happened last Halloween. "Don't worry, I doubt there will be a troll infiltrating Hogwarts this time."

"Don't jinx it," Lisa joked, though her attempt at brevity fell a little flat. Still, Harry offered her a tight smile that let her know he appreciated her putting in the effort to cheer him up.

"Anyways, you guys go have fun," Harry waved them off. The four still looked very reluctant, but eventually began moving down towards the Great Hall where the large Halloween feast would be prepared. He hoped they had a good time.

And while they went to the Great Hall, Harry began moving in another direction. As much as he enjoyed spending time with his friends, he really didn't want to go down to the Great Hall and watch as everyone enjoyed themselves and celebrated the day his parents died. He honestly didn't know if he would be able to bear being around such festivities while he felt like doing nothing more than mourning the loss of his parents.

He arrived in front of the door to The Clubroom within ten minutes. Opening it, he walked inside and soon discovered that he was not alone.

"What are you guys doing here?" Harry asked of Blaise, Daphne and Tracey when he saw all three of them sitting down on the couches. They looked like they had been conversing about something, but had stopped when he came in.

"What does it look like?" asked Tracey rhetorically, crossing her arms over her chest and giving him a large grin. "There was no way we were going to let you wallow in your own guilt like you did first year. From what I remember, the others let you go off on your own and you almost got killed by a troll."

"Yeah, well, blame Quirrell for that," Harry mumbled as he moved further into the room. He wasn't really sure what to think about his friends joining him on the day he mourned his parents, which was really just Harry speak for working on his projects while not thinking about what he had lost this night, but he wouldn't deny the warm feeling that spread from his chest to the rest of his body at the realization that they were missing the Halloween feast just to spend time with him.

"The others should be here soon," Daphne said as Harry sat down. Tracey made room for him to sit between her and Daphne by scooting over slightly. Harry looked at the blond Slytherin with a questioning glance as he sat down, which she noticed because a second later she was giving him a slight smile. "Susan and Hannah went to the kitchens to get some food."

"Ah," Harry had not realized the others were in on this. Did that mean Hermione, Lisa, Neville and Terry were also going to be coming in soon?

"In case you were wondering," Daphne continued, "The others will also be showing up soon as well. They probably just met up with Hannah and Susan to help carry the food." Looks like that answered that question. Was this girl psychic or something?

"Are you guys sure you don't want to go down to the feast?" Harry asked. "I don't want to drag any of you down with my negativity, and I don't think I'll be very good company."

"Don't worry," Tracey reassured Harry by patting him on the shoulder while giving him a grin that did very little to actually reassure him. "We're not going to get upset or anything just because you're being moody and broody."

"Gee, thanks," Harry muttered dryly.

"You're welcome."

XoX

Several minutes after Harry arrived at The Clubroom, Susan and Hannah came in along with the rest of their friends bearing a large picnic basket and several cups, plates and utensils.

"Hey, Harry!" Hannah greeted him in her ever cheerful voice. Harry gave her a small smile, even though he didn't really feel like smiling that much. "How are you doing?"

"I'm doing alright, I suppose," he said softly. A hand lightly touched his arm to offer him some comfort, however little it may be. Harry didn't even need to look to know who it was. "How are you?"

"Could be better," Hannah admitted, though she was still smiling. Beside her, Susan set the picnic basket on the table and opened it up while Hermione and Neville helped by handing out plates, cups and utensils to everyone. "You see, I've got a friend who isn't feeling very good today, and I don't really know how to cheer him up."

"This friend sounds kind of like a downer," Harry managed to crack a small joke. There was a small chorus of giggling from Hannah and some snickers from Tracey, but not much else.

"He's not really that bad," Hannah continued the joke so as to keep the situation light. "He just needs to realize that all of his friends are here for him, whether he wants them to be or not." As if to emphasize this point, Daphne leaned into his shoulder.

"Thanks," Harry whispered as Susan took out the food. There was a large variety it seemed, most of it, Harry noticed, was sweets: Cauldron Cakes, candy, caramel covered apples and many more sugary foods that Harry would never touch on his worst day. Thankfully, there was other food, healthier food as well, even if most of it consisted of sweets; yams, various meats and rolls of bread. Those, Harry did help himself out to. He also tried a bit of the treacle, though again, he did not have much.

Throughout much of the dinner, Harry's friends talked about anything that

took their fancy: Hannah as telling Tracey and Lisa about this new article of clothing she wanted to get (apparently, it was the latest in wizarding wear), Blaise and Hermione were discussing the finer points of pure-blood rules and regulations and whether or not they were any better than their non-magical counterparts, and Terry was explaining his latest discovery on his brand new telescope with great enthusiasm to Neville, who looked absolutely lost but nodded along with everything the other boy said. It was a very festive time, almost like Harry was sitting down in the Great Hall, except for one difference. The people here were his friends.

Perhaps that was what made all the difference in the world. While Harry did not really partake in any of the conversation, his heart did feel a bit lighter than if he stayed by himself this night and worked exclusively on his alchemy.

"I saw it in the latest issue of Teen Witch Weekly. It's the cutest set of robes ever!"

"I'd much rather spend my money on a good broom than a set of robes any day."

"Of course you would, Trace. Everyone knows you're a broom maniac."

"Am not!... Okay, I am. So sue me."

"Don't worry. We will."

"You guys are horrible."

"I don't care if you're a broom fanatic, Tracey."

"Thank you for that, Susan. That makes me feel soo much better."

"S-Sorry."

"But don't you think it would be better if the positions in the Wizengamot were chosen by an election instead of being hereditary seats? The Minister of Magic is a position that the people of the wizarding world choose. Why shouldn't we do the same with the seats on the

Wizengamot?"

"For one, those seats are hereditary because of blood. Each one has been around for at least three generations and some, like the Malfoys have been around for six. Of course, then you have those like the Potters, Longbottoms, Bones' and Blacks. They're the ones who had a leading role in creating the Wizengamot. Besides, you make it sound like no one can gain a seat on the Wizengamot. When a house is considered old enough to be pure of blood, they have the possibility of gaining a seat on the Wizengamot. They just need to get a majority vote from the Wizengamot and a sponsor from the House of Lords, which are seats for houses that have been around for at least ten generations."

"That would mean Harry, Neville and Susan have a seat on the House of Lords then?"

"Yes. Daphne's father also has a seat on the House of Lords, though the position is in stasis because he holds a position in the ICW and it is against the laws to hold an international position that may require you to put foreign policies before British ones."

"I was stargazing with Professor Sinistra the other night. You wouldn't believe how much she loved that new telescope I've got. I'm telling you, it's so much better than the wizard ones that it's not even funny. The image is sharper, I can see further, and it even allows you to record what you see. Can you believe that? Of course, I can't actually use the recording equipment at Hogwarts because muggle devices don't work in a magic heavy environment, or so I'm told. But I've used it before when I was at my house. It worked really well there."

Harry closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the couch's headrest.

"You seem to have a few Nargles today."

Harry's eyes opened at the sound of the voice of their newest member. Luna Lovegood was sitting on the floor in between his and Daphne's feet. Just why she was sitting there was anyone's guess. Harry did not think on her reasons too much. He had found out very early, meaning the very first day they met, that the girl was a bit eccentric.

"Do I?"

"You do," Luna nodded. "Are you wearing the necklace I made you?" In response to her question, he pulled the butterbear cork necklace out from underneath his robes. Luna made a humming noise. "Strange, it should be helping keep the Nargles away. Perhaps I used one too many butterbear corks. I used thirteen, which is supposed to be a powerful number, but maybe it would be better to use seven?" And just like that, Luna's gaze drifted off towards the ceiling where she seemingly lost herself counting the tiles.

Harry looked at the girl for a second longer to see if she would say anymore. When it was clear that she had drifted into her own world, he dismissed her words and went back to resting his head against the headrest.

At least he did until a hand slid into his and soft fingers laced with his own. He knew who this was, of course. She was the only person who gave him this kind of physical affection, discreet enough that no one who wasn't looking would notice, but noticeable enough that he could not ignore it.

His eyelids fluttering open, Harry turned his head and found himself staring into crystalline blue eyes set upon an aristocratic, almost princess-like face. He immediately noticed that she was giving him the smile she reserved for just him.

"I don't know much about Nargles," Daphne spoke quietly so as not to let others in on their conversation. "But I do know that your parents probably wouldn't want you mourning their death for twelve years."

"No, they wouldn't," he agreed. "And yet, I feel it's my duty to do so." Harry cast a glance around the room, looking at all of his friends as they spoke. "So many people are sitting around right now, eating and drinking and enjoying the lives they get to live. No one really seems to remember that the very reason they are able to enjoy such peace and happiness is because my parents gave up their lives this night. However, I remember. I know and acknowledge that the reason I am alive right now and able to sit with everyone here is because they died for me. How could I enjoy a

day like this when I'm constantly reminded that the reason I'm even able to enjoy it is because of what I lost this day?"

"I suppose you wouldn't be able to," Daphne scooted closer until their arms were touching. "But I still think they would want you to enjoy this time. Maybe, rather than mourning their loss, you should be thanking them for what they gave you?"

"Be thankful for this life I have?" Harry breathed in deeply. "I suppose I could do that." He smiled at Daphne. "Thank you."

Daphne tossed him a smirk. "I'm just returning the favor."

After that, Harry made it a point to involve himself in his friends conversation, even if he did not really want to. Surprisingly, it became easier for him to speak as time passed. Eventually, Harry was able to converse with his friends as he normally did. In Tracey's words, without the doom and gloom that surrounded him.

They spoke well into the night and even played a few games of exploding snaps before realizing that the feast had likely finished by that point. Not wanting to find themselves getting in trouble because they were out after hours, the group decided to leave.

Because The Clubroom was located equidistant from all four house common rooms, and the junction point where they would split up was the same, the group traveled down the corridors leading in the direction of the Great Hall. They continued to speak, Tracey being the most rambunctious and Hannah being the most talkative of them. Harry and Daphne were definitely the quietest, though they would speak on occasion (Harry would make a comment here and there and Daphne used liberal amounts of sarcasm). It wasn't until they reached the second floor corridor that they ran into a problem.

The first problem was, of course, the large group of students blocking their path. That in itself would not be so unusual if it wasn't for the time. It was nearing nine o'clock now, which meant curfew would be put into place soon. Not even seventh years were exempt from being outside of their common rooms after curfew was up unless they were doing something for astronomy or in detention with a teacher.

As the smaller group began to close in with the larger group, Harry noticed other aspects about the scene, like the fact that not only were a good deal of students were standing around, but so too were the teachers, including Professor Dumbledore.

Then there was the fact that they were near the girls restroom on the second floor. It was a bathroom that went mostly unused because a ghost named Moaning Myrtle haunted it. One of the stalls appeared to be leaking as a large puddle of water could be seen coming out from under the door.

Another thing that had not failed to catch his notice was the cat hanging from a torch bracket by her tail. She was unusually stiff, completely stiff even. Given that he had seen her alive and well and staring down a few students just this afternoon, he knew that the stiffness was not any kind of rigor mortis. Petrification maybe?

And of course, no one could miss the writing on the wall. The large, foot-high words had been daubed on the wall between two windows directly over Mrs. Norris and shimmering in liquid crimson as the light refracted off it's surface was impossible for anyone not to notice.

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED.

ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE.

Thank you everyone who reviewed my last chapter. It didn't seem as popular as my other ones, so I appreciate those of you who let me know what your thoughts were.

This is another short chapter, but I think I managed to capture the essence of what I wanted pretty well. Be sure to let me know what you think. And also make sure to check out my blog this Sunday, which is when my Q&A for this chapter shall be posted.

A Bludger for your Thoughts

Chapter 17: A Bludger for your Thoughts

Harry Potter was frowning as he continued doing his push ups. There were many reasons for him to frown, not the least of which was how the school had discovered Mrs. Norris, petrified and hanging from the rafters last night. It was likely going to be the talk of the whole school once everyone woke up. It wasn't every day something like this happened.

And then there was the large writing on the wall about the Chamber of Secrets being opened. That was an issue that Harry did not even want to think about at the moment.

While both of those were definitely reasons to frown, they were not why he was frowning right now.

It was his work out.

It was beginning to get too easy.

He had noticed that recently, his strength had been growing exponentially from what it had been last year. Even though he had always been in excellent shape, the physical condition he was in now was above and beyond better than back then. He could run further and keep up a full blown sprint for much longer before running out of breath and all of his exercises were getting much easier.

The push ups he was currently doing were an excellent example. Already he had done 150 push ups. Last year, that many push ups would have left his triceps and chest burning something fierce. Now he only felt a mild burn that was barely worth mentioning.

Harry had already deduced that this was because his body was going through puberty. He was producing more testosterone than he had last year. Testosterone was a muscle building chemical. It was the principle anabolic and sex hormone in humans that was responsible for muscular

hypertrophy, or the increase in size of skeletal muscle (a form of striated muscle that is under the control of the somatic nervous system and is one of three major muscle types) through an increase in the size of its component cells.

Essentially, because his body was producing what Harry guessed was maybe five to ten times more testosterone than before (and he had already been producing a good deal of it), his muscles and consequently his physical prowess (strength, speed, endurance and constitution) had gone through the roof. He was now far stronger than he had been just this past summer.

Why was he frowning then? Wouldn't most people think this was a good thing?

It was, and Harry was very pleased that his body was getting stronger, but it still left him with a problem.

Namely, he needed to increase the intensity of his work outs, except, he didn't know how. Harry was already exercising far harder than most boys his age, and even a good many more above his age, did. Not even Oliver Wood, Quidditch maniac extraordinaire, exercised more than him.

There were only two ways to increase the difficulty in an already difficult work out. Add more reps or increase the amount of resistance, aka weight, that he was working with.

He didn't want to add more reps. Harry was already doing well over one hundred reps for each exercise. If he added anymore, he wouldn't have enough time to actually finish his exercising.

Which meant he needed more weight. Unfortunately, transfiguring or creating a weight via alchemy was out of the question, for now at least. The problem with transfiguration and alchemy was that when you changed one thing into another, the thing you were changing it into had to have the same mass and weight as the object you were changing in the first place.

A good example of this would be if Harry were to transfigure a rock into a slipper that weighed .05 Newtons and had a mass of 6 grams, he would

need to find a rock that weighed .05 Newtons and had a mass 6 grams. It made the transfiguration easier.

That was why all the Transformations they had done so far were small transfiguration such as changing a match stick into a needle, or a beetle into a button. Even though the match stick and the needle didn't weigh the exact same, they were close enough that a persons magic and the amount of concentration they put in could make up the difference.

That being said, the larger the difference in weight and mass was the more complicated the transfiguration became and the more precise your calculations on the power and concentration you put in would need to be and the more unstable your transfigured object was if you did not factor all these calculations into equation. When that happened, there was a chance of your magic imploding on itself or creating a powerful force or even reflecting off the object and back at you, damaging your magic or physical body.

And that was just basic inorganic to inorganic transfiguration. It didn't even go into something as complex as organic to inorganic or even organic to organic. Both of those required another formula entirely.

Needless to say, it was incredibly dangerous, and while Harry was good, outstanding even, when it came to organic to organic and self transfiguration, he was not as good at inorganic to inorganic. His studies last year had been very selective and, unfortunately, it had left him lacking in some areas of his education.

Alchemy was even more precise. You can't make a change in alchemy without giving something of equal or greater value. While the difference in transfiguration could be made up with power and concentration, alchemy was completely exact. That was why the alchemical creations were permanent. The magic involved was not used to actually change the object, merely to force the materials themselves to be permanently rearranged into something else.

Thankfully, he managed to find a solution to this particular exercise problem relatively quickly. It was a temporary solution, but it was the best he could come up with on such short notice.

Pushing himself to his feet, Harry made a quick jog over to the tree where Daphne, Hermione, Susan and Neville were all sitting. They had finished their work out a while ago and were now just waiting for him to get finished. The group quickly noticed his approach and stood up.

"All done, Harry?" asked Neville. The boy had not grown much yet, he could still only do less than a fourth of what Harry did, but that was to be expected. It had only been a month since they started truly exercising.

"Unfortunately not," Harry shook his head, "I was actually hoping I could get one of you three to help me." He pointed to the girls, who all looked at him with a questioning glance.

"Us?" Hermione pointed at each of them while Susan flushed. Daphne merely looked intrigued.

"Just one of you," Harry told her, "I need someone to act as a weight to increase the difficulty of my work out."

"What?"

Harry turned to Daphne. "Basically, I need someone to sit on my back while I do push ups to increase the amount of weight I'm working with."

Several blushes accompanied his statement.

"Are you telling us that you want us to sit on you?" Susan's face was the reddest of all. It matched her hair perfectly.

"On my back," Harry corrected. He turned around and pointed at the middle of his shoulder blades. "Right here."

The three looked at each other.

"Why don't you ask Neville to do it?" asked Hermione, blushing furiously. She looked like an overripe tomato.

"Because Neville weighs more than you," he looked at Neville. "No offense."

"None taken," Neville said in good humor. He knew that Harry was not making fun of him because he was bit... chubbier than everyone else. His raven haired friend was simply making a statement.

Harry raised a finger into the air, as if trying to emphasis his point. "Men generally tend to weigh more than women, and right now I am not sure I could do a proper sit up if I added too much weight. It's the same reason I don't just make a set of weights or something to stick on my back." Aside from the fact that it would also require him to find something of equal mass and weight to transfigure or alchemically change.

"I'll do it," Daphne stepped forward. Unlike the other two, she was not blushing up a storm.

She did, however, have a very slight tint of pink covering her creamy cheeks.

Harry thought she looked rather fetching.

"Thanks."

Going back to where he had been working out, Harry got back into his push up position, then laid down on his chest.

"Just sit in between my shoulder blades. If you need to grab hold of something, grab my shoulders."

"Okay," Daphne's voice came out as a whisper that Harry could only hear thanks to his incredibly acute auditory periphery, the sensory system used for hearing.

Daphne gingerly sat herself on his back. It felt a little strange, having someone sitting on his back. Knowing that it was Daphne, a girl he had already acknowledged as one of the prettiest girls he knew, made him feel the unusual, tingling warmth he had come to associate with his hormonal instincts. He could only imagine how Daphne was feeling.

"Are you secure?" He shoved his own feelings to the side. They didn't really bother him anymore and now it was just something he took note of.

"Yes."

With Daphne gripping his shoulders tightly, Harry began doing push ups once more. Several times the blond girl almost slipped off, but after readjusting her grip and Harry helping her stick to him with his magic, he was able to get in a good work out. He was actually beginning to feel the intense, burning ache that was always associated with muscles that had been thoroughly exercised.

"This is very weird," Daphne murmured out loud.

"I'm sorry," Harry told her. "I wouldn't have normally asked you or anyone else to do this, but I wasn't sure what else I can do right now." He would eventually find a way to make something via alchemy, perhaps even create a weighted vest that he could wear, but that would take time, effort and research. At the moment, he needed a solution that was fast, easy and didn't require what could possibly be months worth of researching to work.

"It's fine," Daphne said lowly. Harry wondered if she was blushing. That was her usual tone when her cheeks were red. "I'm glad I can help you with something," her tone became somewhat amused. "Even if it's something like this."

Harry chuckled. "Yes, I imagine it's not often that someone asks you to sit on them."

"No," Daphne's amused giggle was a beautiful thing to hear. He wished she would do it more often. "It isn't."

XoX

Harry's thoughts about Mrs. Norris' petrification being the talk of the school was correct. All throughout breakfast, lunch and in between classes, it was all anyone could talk about. Yet despite what had happened to Filch's cat, no one really seemed to care, nor did they seem all that worried about the words written on the wall. The rumor that had been going around was that someone had decided to play a cruel prank and just didn't fess up.

"You'd think people would have something better to talk about than some stupid cat getting frozen stiff," was all Tracey had to say on the subject when Hannah had brought it up as they sat together on one of the couches in The Clubhouse. "Course, I'm kinda glad the nasty thing isn't around anymore. I always hated that stupid cat."

"Don't you feel bad for it though?" asked Hannah.

Tracey huffed, as if the very thought that she could feel any form of sympathy for the little hellion that had gotten more than several students (her included) into trouble last year was disgusting. "Not in the least."

"I agree with the loud mouth on this one," Terry said, not taking his eyes from his book.

"Thanks, Boot," Tracey's voice was laden in sarcasm. "Cuz your siding with me is just what I want."

Terry shrugged. "Just saying."

"Well, I do feel bad for her," Hannah said. "I also feel really bad for Filch. He hasn't really been the same since Mrs. Norris was petrified." Her eyes then locked on Tracey, or more specifically, what she was doing. "How are you doing that?"

"Don't know," Tracey admitted as she tossed the ball she had been holding into the air, waved her wand and and muttered under her breath to softly for anyone to hear. The ball then began to slow it's descend before falling back into her hand. She would then repeat this process over and over again. "I just do it."

"I wish I could be as good at casting spells as you," Hannah sighed. She looked over at Susan and smiled. "Normally, I think she'd like to be as good as you too, but I don't think she'll be complaining any time soon."

Tracey also looked over at Susan and frowned. "Almost makes me wish I could be as bad at spell casing as her," she murmured.

A Cheshire cat grin appeared on Hannah's face. "Does it now?"

Tracey flushed. "I said that out loud, didn't I?"

"Yep."

"Well crap."

"Language, Tracey."

"I get enough of that from Hermione," Tracey glared at the brunette across from her. "I don't need to hear it from you too."

Lisa smiled, but did not look up from her homework, a foot long essay on the Hair-Raising Potion. "Since she isn't here at the moment, I have decided to take her job until she comes back from the library."

"Ugh, great," Tracey slumped in her seat. "This is just what I need. Another mum, as if Hermione and my own weren't enough."

"There, there," Hannah patted her friend on the shoulder. "Don't worry, I won't become your nanny."

"Somehow, hearing you say that doesn't make me feel any better."

While Lisa, Hannah and Tracey were sitting on the couch, writing essays, or in Tracey's case, getting a good natured teasing, Susan and Harry were standing together, with Harry coaching Susan on how to cast the *Arresto Momentum* charm that Tracey seemed capable of casting like a pro.

"The *Arresto Momentum* is actually a lot simpler to than most people think," Harry explained. He had his wand out in his left hand as he stood in front of Susan, who was also clutching her own wand. "The wand movement is nothing more than a wave," he waved his wand in front of her, the tip pointed up as the wand made a graceful curve. "And the incantation is just as easy. The only trick to performing the *Arresto Momentum* is that it requires a certain mind set. Unlike the levitation charm, when using this spell you must will the object to slow down rather than simply levitate. It sounds easier than the *Wingardium Leviosa*, but in truth, it's more difficult. You could almost say that the levitation charm is simply the first level and this is the next step up."

"So, wave my wand like this," Susan waved her wand in an approximation of what Harry did just a few seconds ago. "And visualize the object I'm trying to slow down in my mind while casting the spell."

"Yes."

Harry pointed his wand at the air and concentrated his magic. A very small, red ball formed near the tip. Conjunction. One of the harder branches of Transfiguration and one he had only just gotten into. This was about all he could do at the moment.

He looked at Susan.

"Ready?"

Susan nodded, her wand held up and clenched tightly in her hand. "Yes."

Harry tossed the small ball into the air. The red ball moved in a gentle, parabolic arc, ascending until it reached its peak and then descending as gravity took its effect on the object.

Susan waved her wand. "*Arresto Momentum!*"

Nothing happened. Not even a twitch. The ball continued its descent, hitting the ground several times as it bounced across the room before Harry recalled it to his hand.

Susan's shoulders slumped. "I don't understand," she said dejectedly. "I did everything right. The wand movements, the incantation. I even visualized the ball slowing down." She looked up at Harry, a silent plea in her eyes. "What am I doing wrong?"

For a moment, Harry said nothing. It was only after several seconds of silent contemplation that he finally decided to speak. "I think I know what your problem is."

"You do?" Susan looked at him with what he could only describe as hope in her eyes. They were slightly wide and alight with a strange focus that only came from people who wanted some kind of reassurance or aid.

Lisa Crawft used to give him this look often.

"Yes," Harry smiled, "The problem is that your magic is likely geared towards another branch of magic other than Charms. What's your wand made of?"

"Fir and Dragon Heartstring," Susan answered dutifully, having remembered what Olivander told her about it when she had first gotten it. "It's seven inches."

"Seven inches?" Harry raised an eyebrow, "That's a powerful number in magic. It likely means you're a very powerful witch with great potential." Susan's cheeks flushed red. "And it looks like I was right. Fir is a very resilient wood, very sturdy and, from what I know, it's best suited for Transfiguration. Professor McGonagal's wand is actually made of Fir."

Susan looked rather astonished to know her wand was made of the same wood as the head of House Gryffindor. "It is?"

"Indeed. To top it off, your wand core is a Dragon Heartstring. Wands with a Dragon Heartstring core tend to produce the most power, which is much more essential in Transfiguration than Charms. Hence the reason you're having so much trouble."

Susan bit her lower lip. "So what do I do?"

"I have an idea," Harry told her, walking closer. "I want you to close your eyes."

She didn't even question him as she closed her eyes.

"As I was saying before, the reason your having trouble casting the *Arresto Momentum* Charm, or any Charm, is because your magic is specifically geared towards Transfiguration. These two branches are polar opposites of each other; one is casting spells that causes a specific effect to a person or object, the other is changing a person or object into something it's not. This makes it difficult for someone with a high aptitude for one of those types of magic to cast the other."

While he spoke, Harry walked around Susan until he was behind her.

"In order to cast for you to cast a spell under the Charms classification, you need to focus more on getting a feel for your magic and concentrate on the spell you are casting more."

"How do I get a feel for my magic?" asked Susan.

"That's what we're about to work on," Harry said. "I want you to imagine yourself falling through a large hole. Only, instead of that whole being pitch black, I want you to imagine it as pure white and exuding a bright light." He paused. "Let me know when you have that image down."

"I have it," Susan's soft voice spoke several moments later. It was so soft Harry doubted his friends had heard it.

"Good," Harry stopped right next to her. "Now, don't be alarmed."

He took her hand. Susan stiffened, but only for a moment before relaxing. Her cheeks became slightly red, but she clutched his hand tightly.

"Now," Harry began actively releasing his magic. Susan gasped. "Tell me what you feel?"

"I feel... warm." She looked warm too, if her red face were any indication. "And... Safe? No." She shook her head. "It's more than that. I feel like my entire body has been wrapped in a cocoon. At the same time I feel like there's some kind of energy traveling through my body."

"Where's the energy coming from?"

Susan pointed to her chest.

"That energy," Harry told her, "Is your magic."

"Really?" Susan's face took on a look of wonder. Her eyes were still closed, but there was a kind of open mouthed expression on her face that came from those who were experiencing something they had never experienced before.

"Yes. You can open your eyes, by the way."

Susan did as told, her brown orbs widening at his close proximity to her. She flushed even more than before, but didn't back away from him.

"Now then, I want you to try and feel for that current again," Harry instructed, pulling his hand away. He missed the look of disappointment that flashed across Susan's face. "When you have it, tell me."

Scrunching her eyes closed, Susan began to concentrate again. Harry watched her, smiling a bit when he saw her nose wrinkle as she focused on the task he had asked her to do. It was pretty cute.

A minute later, she opened her eyes.

"I think I've found it."

"Excellent," Harry held the ball of up again. "And now that you're in touch with your magic, are you ready to try again?"

Susan hesitated for a second, then nodded.

Harry tossed the ball into the air.

Susan waited until the ball had nearly reached it's peak, then waved her wand.

"Arresto Momentum!"

As the ball finished transcribing it's parabolic arc across the room and was now beginning it's descent, it inexplicably began to slow. It was as if there were a large fan blowing in front of it, or the effects of gravity slowly decreasing. By the time it hit the ground, the ball was only going about one-twentieth of the speed it normally would have moved at.

"I did it!" Susan cheered. Harry smiled.

"So you did."

"Thank you, Harry!"

Without really think about what she was doing, Susan pulled Harry into a

strong hug.

A moment later she realized she was hugging Harry Potter and quickly jumped back with a loud 'eep!', almost falling to the floor as she stumbled backwards.

"You know, if you want to hug me, you can." Harry had plenty of experience with hugs. They were a Lisa Craft special. "I'm not adverse to it."

Susan just let out more squeaking noises as her face went from red to atomic red. Harry wondered if her magic was actually involved in making her face glow like that. He wouldn't even be surprised if steam started pouring out of her ears.

Just then, the door opened and in walked the rest of their group. Hermione was in the lead with the spacey Luna directly behind her. Daphne came in next, carrying a book she had been looking for, for a while now. Coming in last was Blaise and Neville.

"Hullo," the greeting came from more than just Harry. Only Tracey's "hey" broke the strange moment of synchronicity between friends.

Hermione just grunted as she plopped onto the seat next to Lisa.

"Geez," Tracey muttered, "What crawled up your butt and died."

"Don't mind her," Luna told everyone, "She just has a bad case of Whakspurts right now."

"Really?" Tracey eyed the bushy haired witch and scooted away playfully. "They're not contagious, are they?"

"Not that I know of."

"They're not contagious because they don't exist," Hermione grumbled. "Whakspurts and Nargles and all those other strange animals are completely fictitious."

"Fictitious like Lockhart's books," Daphne's wit was as sharp as ever.

Hermione cast the blond Slytherin a mild glare as several of their friends laughed. "Don't insult Lockhart's work. He's a brilliant man."

"He's a brilliant liar at any rate," Blaise said. Luna surprised everyone by nodding in agreement.

"Daddy actually thinks he's working with the Ministry as a part of the Rotfang conspiracy."

"Well, there you have it," Blaise smirked at Hermione's darkening countenance. "Lockhart's a liar working with the government as part of the Rotfang Conspiracy."

"And just what is the Rotfang Conspiracy?" asked Hannah, looking curiously at the blond.

"It's a secret organization within the Ministry that is trying to bring the Ministry of Magic down through a combination of Dark Magic and Gum Disease."

"Well," Hermione murmured thoughtfully. "Gum disease is a rather serious issue. I don't know where wizards go to clean their teeth, but it can get pretty nasty if you don't have regular cleanings..." she trailed off when she noticed everyone was looking at her. With red spots appearing on either cheek, Hermione shrank into her robes and mumbled, "my parents are dentists."

After a new round of laughter erupted from everyone, Tracey wiped away a tear and asked, "So what's got your knickers all bunched up in a twist?"

"Language, Tracey."

"Right, right, mind my language. Now spill."

Hermione huffed, but complied. "All the copies of *Hogwarts, A History* have been taken out. And there's a two-week waiting list!"

Everyone shared a look.

"Don't you have a copy of *Hogwarts, A History*?" asked Tracey.

"I left it at home," Hermione grumbled, "I didn't think I'd need it."

"I hope you don't want it to look up information on the Chamber of Secrets," Harry frowned at his friend as he sat down next to Daphne, who had her book open and propped in her lap, though she was not paying attention to it.

"Why else would I want that book?" asked Hermione, completely missing the warning tone in his voice. "I was hoping to find some information on the Chamber of Secrets, but it seems everyone else had the same idea."

"Hermione," this time, Harry's tone caught not just her attention, but everyone else's as well. "I don't want you or anyone else looking up information on the Chamber of Secrets."

"What?" Hermione looked shocked. "Why not?"

"Because whatever managed to petrify Mrs. Norris is incredibly dangerous. Not even Professor Dumbledore could cure her petrification. From what I managed to hear through the grapevine, they'll only be able to cure her when the Mandrakes have matured and they can create the Mandrake Restorative Drought." Harry leaned back and crossed his arms. "Whatever is in that chamber is not something a couple of second years should be messing with."

"But we protected the stone from You-Know-Who last year?" Hermione pointed out.

Surprisingly, it was Tracey, not Harry, who turned her argument on its head. "Yeah, and look how that turned out. A good deal of us were practically useless, some of us almost died and Harry was sent to the Hospital Wing in critical condition. We were lucky."

"Is that... common sense?" asked Lisa, honestly sounding shocked. Hermione was gaping. "From Tracey?"

"What does that mean?" Tracey sounded indignant. "I have a lot of common sense, thank you very much."

"If you do, you sure don't use it very often," Terry murmured.

"Bite me, Boot!"

"No thank you."

"Like I was saying," Harry raised his voice. "Digging further into the Chamber of Secrets could be very dangerous. It's best if we leave the task of finding out what's happening to the Professors."

Unlike last time, they were not dealing with a one-fourth of his body already in the grave Dark Lord who managed to slip under their nose by possessing someone else. Nor was there any real benefit in trying to solve the mystery behind the Chamber of Secrets. It was more dangerous and there as nothing to be gained by it. That was not the kind of venture he was willing to partake in.

He would leave it to the teacher's this time. Harry had no doubt they would actually try to get to the bottom of the attack on Mrs. Norris. If the situation began to escalate, they could very well find themselves out of a job when Hogwarts was forced to close down in order to protect the students.

"I guess you're right," Hermione sighed, slumping her in seat. "Still, I do wish to learn a little more about the Chamber, even if it's only for academic purposes."

"I doubt you'd learn anything in *Hogwarts, A History*," Lisa said. "The Chamber of Secrets was supposedly built in, well, secret, by none other than Salazar Slytherin himself. If the Chamber does exist, the only one who would know anything about it are him and his heirs. And since Slytherin is dead and I doubt his heir would tell you anything, you're kinda out of luck."

As Hermione began looking more depressed, Harry breathed a sigh of relief. His bookish friend was surprisingly Gryffindor when it came to matters such as dangerous adventures. He was glad they had curtailed her desire to learn more so soon. Who knows what may have happened if Hermione had looked into the Chamber of Secrets matter any further.

XoX

Harry sat next to Katie Bell as Oliver paced in front of the group. It was the first match of the season and, like always, the Quidditch Captain of Gryffindor was giving his usual speech.

"This is the first game of the year," Oliver was saying, "We need to come on strong and show everyone why they should fear our team. We've worked harder than anyone else, we've got the best damn line up I've ever seen, and we're playing Slytherin."

"I'm not sure what that last one has to do with everything else," George said.

"Too right," Fred added, "What does playing Slytherin have to do with anything?"

"Everything!" Oliver whirled on the two, a maniacal gleam in his eye. "We have to show those snakes who the better team is! We need to show everyone that we're the better team. Last year we won the Quidditch Cup, and I see no reason why we shouldn't win it this year."

Harry leaned over to Katie and casually whispered in her ear. "Some things change..."

"... Others remain the same," Katie finished for him, giggling softly. "It seems no matter what happens, Ollie will never be any different."

"True, but it's kind of reassuring to see that Oliver hasn't changed just because we won the Quidditch Cup last year." Harry paused for a second. "You nervous?"

"No," Katie's braid swayed slightly as she shook her head, "Last year I was, but with you on our team, I don't think it's possible for us to lose."

"Don't forget about everyone else," Harry gestured towards her and the others. "A Seeker might have what some people call the most glamorous position, but your job is just as, if not more important."

"Are we being humble?" Katie teased.

"Of course not," Harry chided, "I am simply pointing out that it takes more

than a great Seeker to win a Quidditch game. Even if the Seeker is amazing, a team can still lose if the other players are of poor quality."

"Whatever you say, Harry."

"Just what are you two whispering about?" asked Angelina, interrupting them.

Harry and Katie were quick to separate.

"Nothing," Katie said quickly, a little too quickly.

"Oh really?" Angelina's eyes narrowed.

"We were just talking about the sense of deja vu we're getting here," Harry added.

"It does feel like we've been in this position before, doesn't it?" Alicia smiled slightly, her eyes dancing as she looked at Oliver, who was reprimanding the twins for something they said. Harry gave a smile of his own.

"Indeed."

The group soon found themselves walking onto the pitch. Cheers erupted from all around the stands as everyone made to show their support for the team they wanted to win. Most, Harry noticed, was showing support for Gryffindor. Slytherin still wasn't that popular a house, despite his attempts at breaking House boundaries.

He wished they would simply cheer for a good match instead of teams, but knew that wasn't possible even if most Houses *didn't* dislike Slytherin.

His keen eyes also managed to pick out his group of friends, they were rather hard to miss.

That may have had something to do with the fact that they had a large flag with an animated image of his face smiling, then winking at everyone and the words 'Go Harry!' below that on it.

He was going to have a very long talk with them about using one of Collins animated photos to make a giant flag in his likeness.

"Shake hands," Madam Hooch told the two captains, Wood and Flint, to do. They both did, gripping much harder than was necessary as they glared at each other. A little ways behind Flint, Titus Button rolled his eyes at the two. "I want a clean, fair game, you two."

Harry mounted his Nimbus 2001, as the others mounted their Nimbus 2000s.

"On my whistle," Madam Hooch said, "Three... two... one..."

As soon as the whistle blew, fourteen brooms rose into the air.

"And it looks like Katie has the Quaffle," Lee Jordan's voice descended upon the pitch as he began to give his commentary. "She passes it to Alicia. Pucey and Flint are coming in to intercept..."

Harry flew in below Alicia as she shot towards the Slytherin goal post. At the very last second, he shot upwards right as Adrian Pucey and Marcus Flint moved to intercept, startling the pair. While they were out of sorts from having him just shoot in from seemingly nowhere, Alicia passed the Quaffle to Angelina, who was further along towards the goal post. Because Titus Button was busy blocking Katie, Angelina had a clear shot at the goal, which she took when Harry flashed past Miles Bletchley to distract him.

"Goal for Gryffindor! The score is now ten to zero, Gryffindors lead. That's showing those louzy..."

"Lee Jordan! I will not brook any insulting comments from you this game!" Professor McGonagall was heard clearly over the roar of the crowd.

"Right..." Jordan sounded properly cowed. "A-Anyways, the score is ten to zero, Gryffindor."

With the match starting off strong, Harry quickly began ascending to the top so he could take a quick look around the pitch for the snitch. Terrence Higgs was already high above the pitch and searching himself.

It was only thanks to finely honed reflexes and his ability to sense danger that Harry managed to twist his broom away in time to avoid getting hit by the bludger that whizzed past his head. The bludger was so close that he actually felt his hair getting ruffled as it flew passed him.

He began to ascend again now that the danger had passed, only to realize that it had not passed and he was still in trouble as the bludger looped around and came back at him.

Eyes widening, Harry performed a quick barrel roll, moving sideways to avoid the flying, leather ball.

The Bludger followed him.

Jerking the handle of his broom up, Harry just barely managed to avoid getting hit again. He looked behind him to see the bludger looping around once more to make another pass at him and frowned. There was something wrong with that bludger.

Fred swooped in a second later and smacked the bludger away as it closed in on Harry before he could make to dodge.

"That was a close one," he looked at the raven haired Seeker. "You alright, Harry?"

"Just fine," Harry replied. "Listen, I think that bludgers been tampered with." Both were forced to move again as the bludger came at Harry. Fred beat it away with the bat, giving them only a few more precious seconds before it came back. "It's only going after me."

"You think Slytherin tampered with it?"

"No," Harry shook his head. "But someone did. Listen, I want you and George to focus on helping the Chasers. I'll keep that bludger busy while I look for the Snitch."

Fred looked concerned. "You sure?"

They dodged the bludger again.

"Positive. Now get going!"

Fred and Harry flew off in opposite directions, Harry up and and Fred back towards his brother and the three Chasers. The bludger followed Harry, just as he had predicted.

What followed was a series of intense aerial maneuvers as Harry continuously evaded the bludger, all the while looking for the Snitch. Several times he would move in close to the Slytherins, allowing them to take the brunt of the bludgers attacks with some carefully timed evasions, but for the most part, he simply looked for the Snitch. The sooner he found it, the sooner he could get this damn ball off his tail.

"It looks like Harry Potter has led that bludger back towards Flint again. Oooh! So close. Maybe next time Flint will actually get hit. I think his face might look better if it was rearranged."

"Lee Jordan! Detention after the match!"

"What? I was just joking!"

Harry ignored the commentary from Lee as best he could and focused on the task at hand, finding the Snitch. He swerved and weaved and spiraled and looped, keeping the bludger from being able to properly track him as he searched the skies. The bludger was slower to turn than him. It couldn't make the sharp turns that he could, which gave him a serious advantage over it.

It was raining now. Harry was pleased that he had the foresight to put rainproof and warming charms on his uniform. Katie was also probably grateful. Unfortunately, he couldn't rainproof himself. His hair was slick against his forehead and his skin along his face and neck were drenched. The only reason he hadn't gone blind was because he was using his own magic to create a very small water repelling shield similar but different to the *Protego* in front of his eyes.

"Gryffindor scores again! The score is now ninety to fifty, Gryffindor!"

The bludger came at Harry head on after he dodged it again, this time without looking. Tilting his body to the left, Harry spun his broom along it's

axis. The bludger passed him by, nearly taking off one of his feet in the process. Seconds later, Harry had righted himself and took off like a muggle bullet being fired from a gun.

And that was when he saw it. The Snitch. It was hovering over by one of the stands bearing a number of students, most of them Hufflepuff by the colors of their robes.

Without a thought, Harry pushed his broom hard. Within seconds, he had reached top speed and bore down on the Snitch almost before it realized he had seen it. Despite this, it still managed to slip from his grasp, zipping up and away.

Harry quickly followed, corkscrewing as he turned his broom around, losing only a little bit of his speed in the process.

"It looks like Harry's seen the Snitch!"

While Harry began following the Snitch, Terrence Higgs began following Harry when he realized that his rival in Gryffindor was on the Snitch's tail. It was unlikely the other boy could see it as well in this rain. He did not have Harry's magically enhanced vision. That was the most logical reason why he was following Harry, and from a distance at that. He was being cautious. The last time this had happened, Harry ended up performing the Wronski Feint on him and he had been plowed into the ground.

That would work to Harry's advantage.

Now if only he could get rid of that bludger...

Harry stayed on the Snitch's tail as it raced across the pitch. Terrence had fallen behind, his Nimbus 2000 not able to keep up with Harry's 2001, especially with the current weather conditions. The Snitch went straight towards one of the towers, then turned ninety degrees and headed down. Harry followed.

Fifteen feet.

He was closing in on the snitch now. The wind was howling in his ears as

he pushed his broom to the limit. He kept his senses alert. It wouldn't do to get hit by the bludger just before he caught the Snitch.

Ten feet.

His sense of danger flaring, Harry performed a deft barrel roll, dodging the bludger as it whizzed by. He leveled off again. A quick look ahead confirmed the Snitch was still in his sights and he was getting closer.

Five feet.

He could see the bludger coming back for another pass on his left. His eyes narrowed as he judged the distance between him and the Snitch and him and the bludger. It was going to be a close call.

One foot.

The Snitch tried to lose him by shooting down and reversing direction.

Harry twisted his broom as the Snitch shot under him. His left hand came off the broom handle and reached out, snatching the Snitch right out of the air, his fingers closing around it. A second later, he leveled out and righted himself.

Then the bludger came.

Harry had only a moment to react before the bludger hit him. His foot lashed out on instinct. Like always in times of duress and high emotions, Harry's magic came to his aid without him consciously calling on it. With his own magic enhancing his kick, the bludger was sent flying backwards at nearly twice the speed it had struck him with.

A wince was the only sign that Harry had actually been injured in the small exchange.

Ignoring the jolt of pain in his leg, Harry raised his hand up high.

"And Harry has caught the Snitch! Gryffindor wins!"

It would take nearly ten minutes before the game would actually be called

despite Lee's words. The bludger would try to hit Harry several more times until Madam Hooch was forced to blow it up with a *Bombarda*.

XoX

It was a long time before he ended up going to bed that night. Gryffindor had another big party to celebrate their first victory of the season. It had certainly been a bash to remember; the twins had smuggled snacks from the kitchen and butterbear from... somewhere. No one ever knew where they got their hands on any of the illegal items Harry often found them with. Everyone had talked and laughed and had a grand time.

Being the sporting person that he was, Harry had allowed himself to get pulled into the party. He spoke with Dean and Seamus until they got into another Quidditch vs. Soccer argument, regaled Fay Dunbar, Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown with the story of how he caught the Snitch (they were hanging on every word despite having been there to see it), and had shared jokes and made conversation with the members of his team. It was only after nearly three hours when Professor McGonagall had come in and half-heartedly sent them to bed that Harry had gone up to his room and got ready to sleep.

As a precaution, Harry still closed his curtains all the way and cast his silencing charm before going to bed. While he didn't let his hormones effect him anymore, he still dreamed. It was best not to tempt fate by not putting up some means of keeping his privacy while he slept.

Harry laid down and closed his eyes. His breathing began to even out as he began the half an hour process of clearing his mind of the days events. Slowly, his body began to relax as slumber started to take him.

A weight appeared on his chest.

Harry's eyes snapped open. His hand lashed out, ready to strike at whoever was attacking him.

His fist stopped just a few centimeters from the long nose in front of him.

"Dobby?" Harry blinked several times as Dobby's large, tennis ball eyes stared into his own. "What's going on? Why are you here? How did you

get here?"

"Harry Potter came back to school," he whispered miserably. Harry twitched at his questions being ignored. "Dobby warned and warned Harry Potter. Ah sir, why didn't you heed Dobby? Why didn't Harry Potter go back home when he missed the train?"

"I see," Harry quivered for a moment before mastering his anger. Anger didn't help. It would only cloud his judgment. "That was you who stopped the train." Dobby flinched. "And I'm guessing you're the one who sent that Rogue Bludger after me as well."

"Indeed yes, sir," said Dobby, nodding his head vigorously, ears flapping. "Dobby hid and watched for Harry Potter and sealed the gateway and Dobby had to iron his hands afterward —"

He lifted up his hands and Harry saw the self inflicted damage that had apparently been done to them. Barely hidden by the poorly wrapped bandages that covered his hands and fingers was a mass of burnt skin. A good deal of it was scarred. It wouldn't be permanent, provided he got magical aid, but Harry doubted his master, whoever that was, would let the House Elf get such treatments.

"— but Dobby didn't care, sir, for he thought Harry Potter was safe, and never did Dobby dream that Harry Potter would get to school another way!"

Harry closed his eyes. "And the Bludger?"

"Dobby thought that if Harry Potter were injured enough, he would be sent home."

In some strange, twisted way, the House Elf's words made sense. This Dobby was so set on keeping Harry from getting killed by whatever plot was being concocted at Hogwarts, that he was willing to injure him in a misguided attempt to get him sent home. After all, it was better to be injured than dead.

There was just one problem.

"The only way I am leaving this school is in a body bag," Harry told Dobby in a voice that could cut steel. His burning green irises met Dobby's wide, goggling eyes. "Unless you intend to kill me, there is no way I am leaving."

"Harry Potter doesn't understand. Ah, if Harry Potter only knew!" Dobby groaned, tears dripping onto his ragged pillowcase. "If he knew what he means to us, to the lowly, the enslaved, we dregs of the magical world! Dobby remembers how it was when He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was at the height of his powers, sir! We house-elves were treated like vermin, sir! Of course, Dobby is still treated like that, sir," he admitted, drying his face on the pillowcase. "But mostly, sir, life has improved for my kind since you triumphed over He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Harry Potter survived, and the Dark Lord's power was broken, and it was a new dawn, sir, and Harry Potter shone like a beacon of hope for those of us who thought the Dark days would never end, sir... And now, at Hogwarts, terrible things are to happen, are perhaps happening already, and Dobby cannot let Harry Potter stay here now that history is to repeat itself, now that the Chamber of Secrets is open once more."

Having already experienced what this House Elf was like once before, Harry reacted the moment Dobby's eyes widened in horror. His hand shot out, a mere blur of motion, latching onto the wrist that tried to grab his curtains, no doubt Dobby's attempt to strangle himself or something, and kept a firm grip.

"So there really is a Chamber of Secrets," Harry murmured as the House Elf tried to pry itself from his grip. It was no use. Harry was using magic to enhance the strength of his fingers. Nothing short of a magically enhanced crowbar would be prying his grip anytime soon. "No surprise there. All legends and myths hold a grain of truth to them." Harry let go of Dobby and looked at the House Elf as he stumbled backwards now that he was free. "And you say it's been opened before? I am guessing that this is the terrible plot you mentioned to me during the summer?"

"Ah, sir, ask no more, ask no more of poor Dobby," stammered the elf, his eyes huge in the dark. "Dark deeds are planned in this place, but Harry Potter must not be here when they happen — go home, Harry Potter, go home. Harry Potter must not meddle in this, sir, 'tis too dangerous for him

to stay here!"

"Voldemort as probably the one to open the Chamber last time." Dobby covered his ears at the dreaded name. Harry ignored him. "However, I still have no clue who Voldemort is. He obviously didn't go by that name at school, and I don't even know which year he graduated." He eyed the miserable looking House Elf speculatively. "I don't suppose you can tell me who opened the Chamber last time, could you?"

"Dobby can't, sir, Dobby can't, Dobby mustn't tell!" squealed the elf. "Go home, Harry Potter, go home!"

"I thought not," Harry sighed. Of course Dobby couldn't tell him who had opened the Chamber last time. That would be too easy. "You'd better go, Dobby. I'm not leaving this school unless it's in a body bag, so you're wasting your time trying to make me leave."

The House Elf's shoulders slumped. "Dobby supposes there is nothing he can do then. If Harry Potter is set on staying, Dobby cannot do much to stop him. Dobby won't kill Harry Potter." Large, teary eyes gave Harry the most pitiful look he had ever seen. Too bad only Lisa Crawft could ever move him with an expression like that. "Just promise Dobby that Harry Potter will be careful?"

"Sure," Harry shrugged. "I'm not going to be looking for trouble this year, so you've got nothing to worry about."

Dobby said nothing, merely vanishing as quickly as he appeared.

Harry laid back down and sighed. So this Chamber of Secrets incident wasn't a singular event. It had been opened before. And from the way Dobby spoke, he not only knew who was doing it, but had known all along. This was the dangerous and terrible plot he had warned Harry of during the summer.

As he closed his eyes and began the task of re-clearing his mind, Harry decided he would speak with Professor Dumbledore tomorrow and let him know what happened tonight. He would let the adults handle this. As far as Harry was concerned, there was nothing to be gained by sticking his neck out and trying to solve the mystery of the Chamber of Secrets

other than a really quick death. Or petrification.

Neither of those options were appealing to him.

Another chapter is posted. I would like to thank everyone who reviewed. Your thoughts and comments are greatly appreciated.

Be sure to let me know your thoughts on this chapter. Any ideas on what I can do to improve this story would be nice.

Aurors and Defense

A/N: I don't normally do these Authors notes, especially at the beginning of my story, but I felt it as warranted this time.

To start things off, I would like to apologize for my prolonged absence. As some of you may know, I just moved into a Condo that I bought. It didn't have the internet, thus I needed to get it set up. I called the people at CenturyLink, which is where I got the best deal, and they said 'sure, but we won't be able to set it up until December 4th' which is today, by the way. I just got the internet set up, like, 10 minutes ago. So you can see, my absence was not done by choice.

Still, I do apologize to those who have been waiting for this chapter and hope you can forgive me for taking so long to get it out.

With all that said, please enjoy.

Chapter 18: Aurors and Defense

The morning after the rogue bludger incident Harry and the rest of the school would discover that another attack had taken place that night.

As was always the case, Harry was sitting with his friends during breakfast as they made small talk; Tracey and Terry were discussing yesterdays Quidditch game (without arguing for once), Blaise and Neville were having a conversation about the latest news in a potions magazine (it had something to do with the new properties found in the Snargaluff plant), Hermione and Lisa were talking history and Susan and Hannah were gossiping about the latest in wizarding fashion (though it may be more accurate to say Hannah was gossiping and Susan was listening quietly).

He and Daphne were sitting next to each other, both being relatively quiet as they merely listened to the others talk. It was a comfortable silence, and one they didn't feel the need to break.

They were at the Gryffindor table today — Harry had actually wanted to sit at the Slytherin table because it was the one table they had never sat at before, but didn't want to push his luck. He was making headway when it came to bringing the Slytherin's 'into the fold' as the old saying went, and he didn't want to play his hand too soon and possibly push them away. Yes, it was best to wait for a little while longer and work with making himself more well-liked among the snakes before sitting with them for a meal.

Harry looked down at his plate, absently noting the different fare he had today. He had asked the house elves if they could mix up his meals so that he would have some variety with what he ate. They had been all too happy to oblige and he had given them a list of recipes to try out during each meal.

This morning they had made him a breakfast burrito with a whole wheat tortilla, egg whites, grated cheddar, baked potato wedges, slices of ham, and a salsa of Harry's own make.

Needless to say, it was a very good, very hardy breakfast.

"What do you reckon Professor Dumbledore is doing here?" Tracey's question had Harry looking up from his breakfast to her. He then turned his attention to the staff table where the Headmaster of Hogwarts sat with Professor McGonagall and Rubeus Hagrid, making conversation with the stern looking Transfiguration teacher. "I mean, he almost never shows up for breakfast, right? What's he doing here now?"

Harry absently wondered the same thing. The only time Professor Dumbledore came down from his office was dinner, in which he would share meals with everyone else, probably as a means of observing the students to see how they were handling themselves. It was what Harry would do in his position.

Regardless of the Headmaster's reasons for being here, Harry could really only think of how fortuitous this was. It would be much easier to get an appointment with the Headmaster since he was already in the Great Hall. Now he wouldn't need to speak with Professor McGonagall and try to schedule an appointment or something.

"Maybe he has some kind of announcement to make," Hannah theorized. It was a sound theory, and one Harry agreed with. There were few reasons for him to be down in the Great Hall at such an early hour. One of those reasons would naturally be if he had an important announcement to make, maybe the delivering of some news that simply couldn't wait until later to be told.

"Do you think he's caught the person who cursed the Bludger that kept attacking Harry during his match?" asked Neville.

"Doubtful," Blaise frowned thoughtfully around the scrambled eggs he was eating. Swallowing the mouthful of food, he continued to speak. "I doubt anyone knows who charmed that bludger. A lot of people think it was someone in Slytherin, but Daphne and I have already done some investigating last night and everyone else in Slytherin was just as stumped about who had cursed that bludger as we were. And I know for a fact that neither Professor Dumbledore nor Professor Snape questioned any of the Slytherins about that event. No, this is about something different, I suspect."

Harry nodded his head faintly, a pleased smile on his face. Blaise was one of the sharper members of their group. Not necessarily smarter or more intelligent, but rather, more capable of using deductive reasoning and logic to correlate information together and bring about a relatively accurate conclusion, and using that knowledge to his benefit.

In other words he was very cunning.

Daphne was also like that, but she didn't like to talk as much.

"Do you think it has something to do with the reason that Professor Lockhart isn't here this morning?" Hermione gave a worried frown to go along with her question. Harry also frowned, though for different reasons.

The 'esteemed' professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts wasn't present in the Great Hall. While not the earliest of risers, the showboater had never missed a single breakfast before; and with it being so late it looked like he might end up missing this one.

"Maybe..."

As breakfast wore on, the trickle of students coming in eventually ceased. Most people who arrived early tended to stay there so they could continue socializing rather than making their way to classes early. It wouldn't matter if they arrived at class anyways since all of the Professors were sitting at the staff table.

That also meant the tables were now filled with students. One thing Harry noticed was that even though it looked like all of the students were now present, there was still a lot of empty space at the tables. Each table was capable of seating over two hundred students, but there were only around fifty to each house.

It was one of the unfortunate side effects of war. Even after twelve years, the war against Voldemort was still showing how far they had to go before truly recovering from the devastation the Dark Lord had caused.

Breakfast soon neared its end. As everyone had their fill of food, Professor Dumbledore stood up from his seat and made to stand in front of the staff table. It appeared the moment had finally come to see why the Headmaster of Hogwarts was down here for breakfast.

Everyone stopped what they were doing and turned in their seats to stare at the old man with blue eyes hidden behind his half-moon spectacles. They were all wondering what kind of announcement he had to make, and after clearing his throat and casting a subtle *Sonorus Charm*, the powerful wizard began informing them as to the exact reason for his presence.

"I hope you are all doing well this morning after that exciting match between Gryffindor and Slytherin," Dumbledore's announcement was met with a few cheers and a few shouts of 'yes!'. The Weasley twins were particularly enthusiastic when it came to letting their joy at their victory over their rivals known.

Despite this, Albus Dumbledore did not smile, and Harry immediately knew that opening line was not made because the headmaster was bringing good tidings.

"While I do not like to be the bearer of bad news, I regret to inform you that another attack took place last night." His words created a tense

silence. Many of the students began looking around, as if trying to figure out who might have been attacked by who was missing. "One of our staff was attacked and has been, regrettably, petrified."

Worried murmurs arose at this news. Many were now beginning to feel truly concerned. Understandable. Hogwarts teachers were supposed to be some of the best witches and wizards magical Britain had to offer. If one of them was attacked, how could anyone possibly feel safe?

"He was found in the hallway near his classroom early this morning," Professor Dumbledore continued, speaking above the rising cacophony of voices. "I am sure that some of you are aware of who I am talking about. He has not arrived to the Great Hall yet, and shall not be here for some time to come." Sitting opposite of him and next to Susan Bones and Terry Boot, Hermione Granger gasped in horror. Tracey would have gasped too, but she was too busy feeling numb to gasp. "Yes, I am speaking of Professor Lockhart, who we believe was attacked when on his way back to his room after the Quidditch match."

The voices became louder, the once quiet murmurs and rumblings turning into shouts of fear and exclamations of terror. Everyone began jabbering all at once. Some asked questions while others decried the possibility that someone as 'amazing' and 'powerful' as Lockhart could have possibly been petrified.

Harry Potter was none of those people. He sat there quietly with Daphne, his mind turning over this new information.

While Professor Lockhart's petrification was a truly unanticipated event, Harry could not help but think that Hogwarts would be better off without the esteemed blowhard ruining this school's education. Maybe now they would end up getting a competent teacher.

Of course, that all depended on what the school planned on doing about this. A teacher being attacked was bound to have far larger repercussions than a student being attacked. There was a chance that this unforeseen crisis would force the school to close down. It really all depended on how Dumbledore dealt with this issue and how the Board of Governors that ruled Hogwarts policy took this event.

"Silence!"

At the sound of Professor Dumbledore's booming voice, the entire hall fell into a steep silence. It was very impressive how quickly the students quieted down.

"I have spoken with the Board of Governors as well as informed the Ministry about what has happened," the Headmaster explained calmly now that he no longer had to shout over everyone else to be heard. "We will be getting a new Defense teacher, and the Head of the DMLE has agreed to not only lend one of her aurors for the task, but has also agreed to send in a task force to not only help discover the culprit behind these attacks, but also to ensure that all of you are protected."

Relieved whispers broke out amongst the population at this new knowledge.

"I am also making a new policy that students are no longer allowed to walk the halls alone." Everyone quieted down as Dumbledore began speaking again. "All students will be walked to and from class by either a teacher, a prefect, or one of the aurors that shall be arriving later today. Furthermore, if you need to go somewhere such as the library, you must have a person in one of those three positions agree to go with you."

There was some discontent muttering about this new policy. A few people seemed to be of the opinion that this would cut into their freedom. And it would, but it wasn't like they could do anything about it. With attacks apparently happening on even the teachers now, they really had no choice but to accept these new rules.

Albus Dumbledore was not done yet.

"The aurors will also be assisting the teachers and prefects with monitoring the halls to ensure that no one is out past curfew and that there is no suspicious activity. And lastly, there will be a new curfew put into place. While the normal rules apply to the House Common Rooms, no one will be allowed out of the Common Rooms after class unless they are either in the Library or serving detention with a teacher."

That last comment got a number of loud protests, but Dumbledore was

having none of it. Raising his wand into the air, a loud bang emitted from the tip, silencing any and all protests.

"This is all for your own good. While I regret having to do this, the situation has become far more dire than before. The person being attacked was not a cat, but a teacher. One of our own and the Defense instructor at that. I have no desire to see one of you getting petrified like Professor Lockhart, thus the reason these new rules were put into place. I have the Board of Governors support on this, as well as the Ministries. Failure to comply with these new rules will result in immediate suspension from school and you will be sent home and forced to repeat a year."

That got everyone to quiet down. Though it was clear very few students agreed with this decision, none of them wanted to protest at the risk of suspension. It was becoming abundantly clear that Dumbledore was very serious.

"With that, I would like all of you to gather around your teachers for whichever class you have. If you do not have class at this time, find a prefect to escort you back to your Common Room. I wish for all of you to remain safe. Hopefully, these precautions will not be needed for long and the culprit will be caught soon."

With everyone now being forced to get up and walk to their teachers or find a prefect, Harry stood from his seat and made a path right for Professor Dumbledore as he appeared to be leaving. His friends looked on in surprise, but could not call out to him as he moved too swiftly and was soon lost to them amongst the crowd of students.

"Professor Dumbledore!" Harry spoke loudly over the clamor of the students. Thankfully, with all that had happened and the news the Headmaster had given, no one paid any attention to him. "Professor Dumbledore!"

Hearing his name being called, Professor Dumbledore turned, then looked down in mild surprise when he saw who had stopped him.

"Mr. Potter," he said, masking his inquisitiveness admirably. "What can I do for you?"

"I wanted to speak with you, sir," Harry said as he stood in front of the much, much taller male. "I may have some information that holds relevance to these attacks."

"May?" Professor Dumbledore furrowed his brow at the strange choice of words.

"I don't know for sure that the information I have is related to what's happening," Harry shrugged helplessly. There was always the possibility that the House Elf he had the misfortune of meeting was simply delusional, but he didn't think so. "But there is a high probability that my information and these attacks have something to do with each other."

"I see," Professor Dumbledore paused, contemplating. After a few moments of what appeared to be deep thought, he looked at Harry again and gestured for the young man to follow him. "Very well, let us talk about this up in my office."

Harry nodded, and quickly followed the Headmaster out of the Great Hall.

XoX

Harry followed Professor Dumbledore as the man led him to his office. They eventually arrived on the third floor and ended up in a corridor that had a large, ugly looking stone gargoyle statue in it. Emphasis on the ugly. Harry was not sure why someone would create a statue like that. Most sculptors tended to put an emphasis on beauty. This thing had a face only a mother could love.

It was the statue they found themselves standing in front of.

"Laffy Taffy."

As he watched the stairs move with a slow, rumbling noise that sounded like two rocks being ground together, Harry shook his head at the password Dumbledore had used for the entrance to his office. He was beginning to wonder if the man might have an overly-obsessive fondness for non-magical treats. Though he supposed every old man deserved his foibals.

"Come along, Mr. Potter," the Headmaster bade Harry to follow him again. Together, they made their way down the staircase that ended in a single wooden door.

Entering the room, the first thing that Harry noticed about the place was that it was not filled with staff members. The last time he had been in this room it had been filled to the brim with all of the faculty at Hogwarts, because of that he had not gotten a good look of the room.

The second thing he noticed was that the room was littered with nicknacks; various silver instruments that Harry didn't dare guess as to what their purpose was stood on silver-legged tables, whirring as they emitted light puffs of smoke and steam. The walls were covered with portraits of what he recognized as the previous Headmasters and Headmistresses; all of them were currently dozing at the moment. There was also a large claw-footed desk that Harry assumed was where the Headmaster sat and behind that was a large shelf with a ratty old hat — the sorting hat — sitting on it.

The room itself was circular, large and beautifully crafted. While not very interested in architecture in general, Harry had to admit that the long since extinct Dwarfs who had built Hogwarts did an excellent job on this room.

Of course, while the room and the nicknacks were interesting, they were secondary to the large, majestic looking bird standing on a bird stand.

Harry found himself in awe as he stood before what had to be one of the most stunning creatures he had ever seen. Beautiful crimson feathers covered it's body and the long, golden tail feathers added a sense of regalia to the bird. It's claws and beak were a gleaming gold and it's eyes a dark black. The crimson body feathers were aglow with what almost appeared to be some kind of fire, as if the creature were made of flames.

Harry knew what this was, but he had never expected to see one in real life (and certainly not in the Headmasters office. It had not been here last time); a Phoenix, a fire bird that was said to be immortal, dying and being reborn from the ashes. They were one of the rarest creatures alive. Just seeing one was said to be an event so singular and rare that it only

happened once a century. That Dumbledore had one as a familiar... well, it really made his respect for the Headmaster go up.

The 'clicking' of the door closing behind him snapped Harry out of his reverie. He looked away from the Phoenix, who had been staring at him with a look that he could only perceive as 'guarded', though he did not understand why.

Professor Dumbledore walked over to the desk, absently stroking the Phoenix's head and causing it to croon a beautiful note, before sitting down in the large chair behind it.

"Would you care for a lemon drop, Mr. Potter?" asked Dumbledore, gesturing to a bowl of candy on his desk. The question was so unexpected that Harry actually needed a few seconds to come up with a suitable response.

"Um... no thank you, sir," he replied unsurely.

"A shame." The Headmaster popped one of the non-magical treats into his mouth. "I have always enjoyed lemon drops. The combination of sweet and sour presents an interesting dichotomy that I have found to be surprisingly pleasant."

Harry had no clue what to say to that, so he said nothing.

"But I suppose you did not come here to listen to my ramblings on muggle candy, did you?" As the Headmaster of Hogwarts looked at him from behind those half-moon spectacles, Harry realized he was being given permission to speak.

"Yes sir, I have come upon some information that I feel is relevant to the attack on Miss Norris, as well as the most recent attack on Professor Lockhart."

With his introduction open, Harry quickly and concisely reiterated what he had learned from Dobby, both from his first meeting with the house elf back at the Dursleys, and their most recent meeting last night. Throughout Harry's tale, Albus Dumbledore sat silently, listening to the boy speak.

"While it is possible that this House Elf knows nothing and is merely making speculations, I feel that there are simply too many coincidences for that to be possible." Harry took a quick pause for breath before pushing on. "From what this Dobby has said, I have managed to draw several plausible scenarios as to who is behind this, though nothing as definite as a name."

Albus Dumbledore rubbed his jaw with his long, thin fingers, digesting what he had just been told. "And who do you feel is the most likely culprit to these attacks?"

"As I said before, I don't have a name, but from the facts that I just told you we can conclude that the attacks are likely being caused indirectly by Voldemort." Harry could see his use of the Dark Lord's name had caught Dumbledore's attention. "From the conversations I had with Dobby, who intimated that Voldemort was somehow indirectly related to this event, I can only conclude that he is the House Elf to the Death Eater that hatched this plot to open the Chamber of Secrets and cause as much chaos as possible, though the reason behind this still eludes me."

"While I do not doubt your convictions, have you given any thoughts on how one of Voldemorts Death Eaters would be able to open the Chamber of Secrets?"

"I have several, but only one of them really has any chance of succeeding," Harry informed the Headmaster. "I believe that the Chamber of Secrets likely requires some kind of key to open. One of Voldemort's biggest claims to fame was the fact that he is supposedly descended of Slytherin. If this is true, then it is likely he found that key and may have given it to one of his Death Eaters for safe keeping. The Death Eater could have then decided to have the key smuggled in and used to open the Chamber."

"Your theory is sound," Dumbledore agreed before deciding to play devils advocate. "But how would they get the key into Hogwarts and open the Chamber?"

"By using the Imperius Curse on one of the students," Harry's answer was immediate, proving he had already thought this question through. "It

would not be very hard to cast the Imperious Curse on an unsuspecting student while they were out shopping for school supplies with orders to open the Chamber of Secrets and slipping the key into their bookbag."

Dumbledore took to running a hand over his long beard as Harry paused for breath. He did not say anything, so Harry continued.

"One of the more interesting facts about the Imperious Curse is that it doesn't just control people's actions, but that the people in question almost never even realize they are under it's control until after the curse has been lifted. Also, while most people think of the Imperious Curse for the absolute control it grants over a person, they never realize the more subtle abilities it has when someone has mastered the curse, like the ability to plant subliminal commands into a person's subconscious. This is how Voldemort had been able to put so many sleeper agents into the Ministry's auror forces during the war, and why he always seemed to be several steps ahead. It is also the reason those who claimed to be 'under the Imperious Curse' were able to get away with nothing more than a fine."

Professor Dumbledore leaned back, a troubled expression on his face. "If what you say is true and one of the students has indeed been placed under the Imperious Curse, then this situation will have become much more complicated." The older man blew out a deep breath. "Finding the Imperioused student will be very difficult, if not impossible."

"Unfortunately, I cannot help you there," Harry said, shrugging. "I only studied the effects because I had been doing an in depth analysis of the war and the actions of Voldemort and his faction, and during it I ran across the information about the Imperious Curse there. I never studied too deeply into the curse, however, therefore I only know what I just told you."

"I appreciate you telling me this much," Dumbledore smiled in the boy's direction. "You have given me a possible direction to this investigation. The information you have provided could very well prove to be the key to discovering the culprit behind these attacks. I will be sure to inform all of the aurors and faculty to be on the lookout for anybody acting suspiciously."

"Of course, all this assumes that the Chamber of Secrets exists," Harry couldn't help but add. He did not want to discount the possibility of him being wrong. "While there is always a grain of truth to every myth, I'm not sure the Chamber of Secrets will hold anything that is capable of dark magic of this caliber. Not anymore at least. It is quite possible that this act of terrorism is just that and there is no chamber, but someone just using a very powerful magical artifact or cursed object to terrify the students."

"Oh, I have no doubt that the Chamber exists," Dumbledore told Harry confidently. "You may not know this, but this is not the first time the Chamber of Secrets has been opened."

"Really?" This revelation surprised Harry. He had not delved into any information regarding the Chamber of Secrets though, so his surprise was not unfathomable.

"Yes, it was back when I was the Transfiguration Professor," Dumbledore revealed. "A young girl by the name of Myrtle died the last time the Chamber opened. I sincerely hope that does not happen this time."

Harry grimaced. He hoped that no one died from this incident as well. There was no telling what kind of political upheaval a death at Hogwarts would cause. They would most likely be forced to close the school. Not a very pleasant thought in his mind.

"So do I."

He then looked at the Headmaster curiously.

"Out of curiosity, where exactly did you find Lockhart?"

"Standing in front of the window next to his classroom," Dumbledore said. For some reason, despite the serious topic, he looked faintly amused. "I believe he was using the window's reflection to practice his smile."

"Ah." Harry Potter had nothing to say, so he said that.

XoX

Classes that day were mostly the same, with the only difference being

that the teachers or a prefect were now walking the other students to their next class. In turn, prefects had been given special privileges in regards to their classes. Just what those privileges were Harry didn't know, but he assumed it allowed them a certain amount of leeway when it came to completing homework assignments on time.

When everyone's classes had ended, all of the students congregated to the Great Hall for dinner. There, the mass of students were finally allowed to not only meet their new Professor for Defense Against the Dark Arts, but also the members of the auror forces that would be in charge of helping protect the students and discovering the culprit behind the two petrifications.

Being one of the more observant students by far, Harry studied the new DADA professor, memorizing their facial structure, features, and general posture and bearing while the others ate and conversed.

The man sitting in the chair that used to belong to Gilderoy Lockhart was a very tall, dark-skinned wizard with strong facial features and broad shoulders. He was bald, but sitting on his head was a round flat hat with intricate purple and gold designs along the sides; it was very different from the standard wizards hat. His robes were a combination of blues and purples and made of a very thick looking material. They also appeared to have leather shoulder pads, though they looked more for decoration than anything else. The only other items of interest to note on him were the thick looking leather boots and the golden earring on his left ear.

"Anyone you know, Harry?"

Turning his head, Harry looked at a curious Tracey.

"I don't know who the Defense Professor is," Harry replied, "But I did see someone I know among the aurors that would be in charge of protecting the students."

"Which one?"

"The female with the bright, bubblegum pink hair."

"Bright, bubblegum pink hair," Tracey deadpanned before looking out at the crowd. "Who in their right mind would — holy shite! She really does have bright pink hair!"

Hermione scowled at her friend. "Language Tracey!"

"Actually, looking at it, I think it's more of a hot pink then a bubblegum pink." Tracey dutifully ignored Hermione's scolding thanks to many hours of practice. "What do you think, Daphne?"

Daphne looked up from her food to stare at Tracey with a very bland expression. "Why should I care what color someone's hair is?"

"Oh, come on! It's pink hair! Bright pink hair! Who in their right mind would have hair like that?"

"Tonks would."

"Tonks?"

"That's the name of the girl with the pink hair," Harry informed the still somewhat stupefied brunette. "Her name is Tonks." He looked back at Tonks who was talking to another man, one that was heavily scarred and looked like someone had taken a cheese grader to his face. Though, it looked like it would be more accurate to say she was talking and he was scowling. "I'm actually surprised to see her here. Last I heard she was actually an auror cadet and still in training."

Tracey shrugged. "She must have graduated."

"What about the one next to her?" asked Hermione, who seemed much more interested in the wizard that appeared to be missing several parts of his body, including a leg, which had been replaced by a peg of wood.

Getting a better look at the auror in question, Harry noticed several other interesting facts about the man. Aside from the rictus of scars marring his face, he had a large chunk of his nose missing, and his hair was dark, gray and grizzled, looking almost as worn as the man himself.

Perhaps the most interesting feature about the man were his eyes. One

of them was a normal looking eye, small and dark, nothing out of the ordinary about it. The other eye, however, was a vivid, electric blue. It was large and as round as a galleon, and appeared to be moving completely independently from his normal eye. Several times Harry even saw the pupil disappearing into the back of the man's head only to return from the opposite side, having made a full rotation.

"You mean the one who looks like he's taken several dozen cutting curses to the face?" asked Terry.

"Yes."

"That's Alastor Mad-Eye Moody," Neville was the one who answered. "They say he's one of the best aurors in the entire world; half the cells in Azkaban are filled thanks to him. Gran says he's one of the strongest aurors to have ever existed."

"Then I'm going to hazard a guess and say all those scars are battle souvenirs," Harry said, shaking his head. "I don't envy what he had to go through to get those."

"I think he got all those injuries during the war against You-Know-Who and when he was chasing after the Dark Lord's Death Eaters after the war ended," Neville replied. He seemed to be the most knowledgeable about this subject among them. "Gran told me he's really paranoid these days. He's also supposed to be retired. I'm surprised he's actually here."

"Hmm."

Dinner continued for nearly half an hour more before Professor Dumbledore stood up from his seat and made his way to the front.

Everyone quieted down as the Headmaster raised a hand for silence.

"I hope you have all enjoyed your meal. As I informed you all this morning, we would be getting a new instructor for Defense Against the Dark Arts. I would like to present auror Kingsley Shacklebolt, who has agreed to become your Professor with the approval of the Ministry of Magic." Having been announced, the new DADA Professor stood up and offered the students a curt bow to some mild applause. "He will be here

with us only for a single term, but I believe with him here, it shall be a very productive year."

The Headmaster paused in order to give the students some time to digest what they had just been told. A number of whispered conversations broke out, all of them about the new teacher and what they thought of him. It was not surprising that they had already judged him before he even had a chance to teach a single class.

Harry decided to adopt a more wait and see approach before making any conclusions about the dark-skinned man.

"With him is Auror Alastor Moody, who has agreed to temporarily come out of retirement to help Hogwarts in her time of need, along with a squadron of aurors to assist him. While Professor Shacklebolt will be teaching you Defense Against the Dark Arts, their job shall be to protect you and screen students coming and going from Hogsmeade to ensure no potential dark objects are being entered into the school. Auror Moody will also be in charge of heading up the investigation over the recent string of attacks in order to capture the culprit before anyone else can be hurt."

As another series of murmurs broke out, Harry found himself nodding his head at the sound decision that had been made here. It was a good judgment on the Headmasters part. By getting aurors involved, Professor Dumbledore not only ensured that the students would feel safe and protected, he also had a group of people that would now be dedicated to the task of weeding out the one responsible for the petrifications. It was a wise move, both politically and morally.

He didn't know anything about any of those aurors other than what he had been told and Tonks, but with the information he had given Professor Dumbledore and whatever wit and skill these aurors possessed, catching the culprit should not take too long.

"So what do you guys think of this?" asked Hannah as she looked around the table at all of her friends. Out of the entire group there, she was probably the least knowledgeable about this type of situation; not including Hermione for obvious reasons. "I mean, getting aurors into the

school and having an auror teaching us?"

"It's definitely an improvement to having Lockhart teach us," Terry said carelessly.

"Hey!" Tracey shouted in anger, her eyes glaring at Terry. "You take that back! Professor Lockhart was an awesome teacher!"

"Awesome at teaching us his favorite color, maybe," Terry snorted at the very idea that Lockhart had been good at teaching. Him? A good teacher? Preposterous! The man couldn't teach his way out of a wet paper bag! "But he wasn't much good for anything else, except for being a bloody fool and a liar."

"You're just jealous because you're not as strong, smart, or handsome as Professor Lockhart is!"

"Oh yes, I'm so jealous of the guy who got himself petrified."

"And there they go again," Lisa looked at the pair with an expression that was a mixture of exasperation and fondness. "I'm beginning to think these two just love arguing with each other for the sake of arguing."

"They're like an old married couple," Daphne declared succinctly. Fortunately for her, said 'old married couple' were far too busy having a lovers spat to hear her. If they had, there was no telling what sort of ranting she would have to put up with on the way to the Slytherin common room. "I swear I can see these two doing this for the rest of their Hogwarts years and beyond."

Harry Potter looked at the two as they argued, which had somehow changed from 'reasons why Lockhart is an idiot and it's counter argument' to 'why the Nimbus 2001 will not be the hottest broom on the market next year'.

He then promptly agreed with Daphne's statement and turned his attention to another conversation. One that was less likely to cost him any brain cells.

XoX

The atmosphere was tense. The air as heavy, the tension so thick you could cut it with a knife. It was a fitting atmosphere given the situation those present found themselves in.

After dinner in the Great Hall was finished, Dumbledore had the Head of Houses escort their students back to their common rooms. With the new rules put in place, no one was allowed out after class hours without a auror, teacher or prefect escorting them. A few people had protested for a while, but Albus stood firm in his decision. While it may rankle some of the more... rebellious of students — his mind conjured up an image of a certain pair of red head twins — it was for their own safety that he did this.

Now all of the faculty and the auror forces that were on loan from the Ministry were standing in his spacious office, waiting for the meeting he had called to start.

Dumbledore was more than happy to oblige them.

"I would like to start off by thanking the Ministry for loaning your services to Hogwarts and thanking you for agreeing to aid us. Hopefully with your help, we'll be able to solve this little mystery before any of the students get hurt."

Dumbledore paused for just a moment to see if anyone had anything to say.

'They didn't.

"Now then, I believe we should get down to business. As you all know, there have been two attacks, one on Filch's cat and the more recent one on Gilderoy Lockhart. We do not know who the attacker is or how they have managed to perform such high level magic. Even I do not know what kind of magic that was performed on these two, only that it has the taint found within all spells that have been classified as dark magic."

The knowledge that even Albus Dumbledore did not know what spell had been used startled the aurors present. It was well known to all of the magical community (and not just Great Britain) that Dumbledore was one of the strongest wizards in the entire world. Point in fact, the only person

with the classification of wizard that was said to be even more powerful than Dumbledore was in America, and he hardly paid any attention to the wizarding community and didn't actually call himself a wizard, so the point was moot.

That one of the current greatest and most knowledgeable wizard of their time did not know a spell was worrisome.

"What clues do we have to go on?" asked Alastor Moody, who appeared to be the only one among the aurors that was not shocked by Dumbledore's admittance of not having all the answers. "Any kind of information about the attacks would be helpful."

"I have compiled a report on both of the attacks and all of the clues we have been able to gather," Dumbledore informed them, "Along with a theory of who might be responsible and how."

"You have a name?"

"No," Dumbledore shook his head. "We do not have a name, though considering the theory put out was that the one responsible may be a former Death Eater that escaped getting sentenced to Azkaban at the end of the war does give us a long list to choose from."

There were a couple of murmurs around the room. A few of the aurors shuffled nervously as they realized how serious this case might actually be. Nymphadora Tonks was one of these people, though the firm hand on her shoulder belonging to that of her mentor, Kingsley Shacklebolt, went a long way towards calming the girl down.

With a flourish of his wand, several copies of parchment flew from his desk and into the waiting hands of every auror and staff member there.

"That parchment contains all of the details behind this theory along with the evidence to support it and a detailed report on both 'crime scenes'," Albus informed everyone. "I would like all of you to read and memorize it. We'll have another meeting tomorrow after the students have gone to bed to see if any of you have any evidence that may support or deny this theory. And now I would like to bid everyone except for Severus and Alastor a goodnight."

With the dismissal readily apparent, everyone except for the two aforementioned men left the room. When the door sealed shut, Moody spoke up.

"The information in this report is pretty damn plausible, well thought out too." The man tapped the parchment with the back of his hand a few times in emphasis. "I definitely get the feeling that it just might be right." He then sent Albus a look. "I also know it's not the kind of scenario you'd think up on your own," the man's voice was a deep growl, like his vocal chords had been put through a blender much like his face.

"You are correct in that I did not come up with it," Dumbledore nodded at his old acquaintance. "The one who created this theory and gave me much of the information was Harry Potter."

"Of course," Snape sighed exasperatedly. Rather than looking angry and irate, he simply looked tired. "Naturally, Potter would have found himself nose deep in this situation."

"I get the feeling that Mr. Potter wants as little to do with this situation as possible," Dumbledore informed Snape. "I believe that is why he gave me this information, so that we may deal with it instead of him."

"Smart lad," Moody growled.

"Indeed."

For a moment, Albus allowed himself to feel a stirring of pride in Harry Potter. The young man had definitely proven himself to be a capable student and leader. He had great expectations for the emerald eyed youth.

"Now onto the reason I both called you here. Severus," Dumbledore got the man's attention. "Does the name Dobby sound familiar to you?"

"Dobby?" Snape's eyes widened marginally. "That's the name of Lucius Malfoys house elf. But how could you know that? Only..." the Head of House Slytherin trailed off, his eyes widening further as the only reason Dumbledore could possibly know about the Malfoy family house elf came to him. "Potter..."

"So Malfoy's the one behind this, eh?" Moody looked like he had tasted something truly foul. "Shoulda known this would be that no good piece of filth's doing. It has his handy work written all over it."

"I did not mention this in the report because I did not want the knowledge leaking out to any wrong parties, but Mr. Potter had a late night visitor," Dumbledore explained to the two. "The house elf, Dobby, was the one to appear before him and warn him of the plot going on at Hogwarts. He did not say it was about the Chamber of Secrets, but did admit to it being indirectly tied to Voldemort. It was through this that Harry came to believe that one of Voldemort's followers was behind the attacks."

"And you suspect they managed to smuggle a dark object in with one of the students?" Moody demanded clarification.

"I don't know, and that is the problem." Dumbledore steepled his fingers together, his expression perturbed. "Fifty years ago, Voldemort opened the Chamber of Secrets when he was a student here. That year, one of the students died and we would have been forced to close down had young Tom Riddle not framed Hagrid for the crime. So far there have been no deaths, just petrification. It's likely that whoever is behind this, whether it's Malfoy or another, is using fear of the myth behind the Chamber of Secrets as a means to terrorize the school for some purpose, likely my sacking, and has simply forced a student through the use of the Imperius Curse to use a dark artifact in order to petrify the unsuspecting."

"Finding an Imperiused student is going to be difficult," Snape remarked, "Especially if they have had the Imperius Curse on them since the summer." Lucius Malfoy was a master of the Imperius Curse. Maybe not to the degree that the Dark Lord was, but certainly enough that they would not act out of the ordinary. And if the curse has had time to entrench itself into the psyche of the student... Snape shuddered at the thought.

"I know, which is why I want you to keep an eye on your Slytherins. I do not know if we will find any clues from your house, but it's better to be safe than sorry."

"You suspect Draco may know something?"

"Doubtful. If Draco Malfoy knew something he would have likely already mentioned it. He has never been one for keeping things to himself."

Snape nodded. "I can do that. If nothing else, he may reveal something we can use against Lucius."

"Speaking of which, is there anything we can do to cast suspicion on Lucius Malfoy?" Dumbledore inquired of Moody.

"Not bloody likely," the growl in Moody's tone darkened, as if just mentioning Lucius Malfoy was enough to make the man mad. "The man's arse currently smells like fresh spring roses. He's actually the only reason this entire debacle hasn't been revealed to the Daily Prophet yet. It makes sense if he's the one responsible. He can act like a concerned citizen doing his civil duty by allowing the aurors to work without the media getting involved, then swoop in when something goes wrong and inform the press about his version of events after the situation has been dealt with."

"I see," Dumbledore sighed, "So there is nothing we can do to Lucius Malfoy at present. And it will likely do us more harm than good, especially since he has the ears of the Minister and a number of contacts within the rest of the Ministry."

"Don't forget the auror corps," Moody added, "While Amelia's been doing her best to screen people who have any connection to Death Eaters or 'Former' Death Eaters, she can't catch everyone. It's more than likely that there are several aurors currently under Malfoy's thumb. I suspect there may even be one or two on the squadron that was sent with us."

"Then it is a good thing I did not inform anyone else about what I have just told you," Dumbledore stroked his beard thoughtfully for several seconds before deciding what they would do. "In that case, we shall simply continue with the original plan. Aurors and faculty will patrol the corridors in pairs and keep an eye out for suspicious activity. Alastor, aside from heading this investigation, I want you to see if you can discover who among the aurors present may be in league with Lucius Malfoy. You'll need to be subtle though, I do not want any hint of this leaking to Lucius."

"Got it," Moody growled, "Was there anything else you needed to talk about?"

"No," Dumbledore shook his head.

"In that case, I'll see you in the morning, Dumbledore."

As Moody stomped his way out of the room, his wooden peg-leg making a dull 'thud, thud' as it hit the floor, Snape turned to look at Albus.

"I shall take my leave as well," Snape informed the man, "I'll keep an eye on Draco. He may not know about this plot, but he may know something else."

"Very well, Severus. Thank you."

Snape gave a curt nod before he walked out of the room, his robes billowing out behind him. As he watched the man go, Albus Dumbledore sank into his chair with a weary sigh.

With all that had gone on last year, he had been hoping this year would be a quiet one, but it seemed that was not going to be the case.

"I guess that old saying is true, Fawkes," Dumbledore looked up at his familiar. "There is no rest for the weary."

Fawkes studied the much younger being before him, then crooned a soft, soothing tune. While it did not diminish his fatigue nor the aches and pains that came with age, the song did lift Dumbledore's spirits again.

Deciding to go over everything he knew about this most recent problem with the Chamber of Secrets one last time, Dumbledore reread the parchment containing all the relevant information he now had and could only frown. He couldn't help but feel like something was missing, a piece to the puzzle that was just in front of his nose and would potentially allow him to solve this mystery if he could but remember it.

Unfortunately, he couldn't for the life of him remember what that something was.

He could only pray that this did not come back to bite him.

Another short chapter, but I felt this was the best time to end it. As I said a few times in my blog, I don't let myself be confined by my word count.

I would like to thank the 104 people who reviewed my last chapter. Your thoughts, opinions and ideas are invaluable.

Before I go, I would like to implore everyone to look at my blog. A good few of you have been asking me the same question for several chapters (such as: is Selene going to come back to the story?). Many of these questions have been answered on my blog, and because I do not like to needlessly add to my word count, I will not answer them here. If you want to know the answers to those questions, read my blog.

Thank you all for reading, reviewing and enjoying my fanfic.

The New Defense Teacher

BIG F*ING NEWS! PLEASE READ!**

I don't know how many of you know this, but a little while ago I finished writing my first original novel. I had sent it off to my editor and he is now almost done. He should be finished this weekend. I plan on having it undergo a final proofreading after that, and then I am going to get it published. With luck, my novel should be available in March.

For those who are curious to know what my novel is about, here is a small summary of my hopefully soon to be published novel, Part 1 of the American Kitsune series, A Fox's Love:

Kevin Swift is a mature young man; he's independent, responsible, gets good grades, and is one of the star runners for the track team. The only thing keeping him from being "Mr. Popular" is this strange problem he has around girls. He just can't talk to them...at least, not without making a fool of himself.

Enter Lilian Pnévma (nev-ma). She's cheerful, vibrant, and inhumanly beautiful. She's also just plain inhuman, something Kevin learns the hard way when he discovers a naked Lilian in his apartment instead of the two-tailed fox he brought home the other day. Lilian claims he is her mate and is willing to do anything—no matter how embarrassing it is for Kevin—to earn his love. Needless to say, life for Kevin Swift just got a whole lot more difficult.

Sounds interesting, right? I hope you guys will enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

And now that I have thoroughly bored you to tears with my ecstatic ranting, I will let you do what you came here to do and read the latest chapter of Harry Potter and the Heir of Slytherin.

Enjoy.

Chapter 19: The New Defense Teacher

"The Disarming Charm, also known as the Expelliarmus Spell or the Disarming Spell is a defensive charm that forces the victim to release whatever they are holding at the time the spell is cast; whether that be a wand, a book, or even a muggle weapon such as a gun."

Harry Potter sat in the middle row with Daphne on his left and Blaise on his right, listening as Professor Shacklebolt lectured them on the Expelliarmus charm. He already knew much of what the man was telling them, having already learned how to disarm his opponents with it last year, but it was good to hear a professional, and auror no less, confirm that his knowledge on the spell was correct.

He was also grateful that they finally had a teacher who seemed competent. Last year they had Quirrell, who acted like a bungling idiot for most of the year, but turned out to be a psychotic killer with an even more psychotic killer attached to the back of his head by the end of it. Harry didn't even feel the need to elaborate on the first teacher they had this year. Professor Lockhart made him *wish* they had Quirrel back because, bungling idiot with a Dark Lord attached to his head or not, he at least taught them more than Lockhart had.

Thankfully, they now had this man. Professor Shacklebolt was an amazing instructor, incredible even. The man's knowledge on defensive charms and dark creatures was simply vast, which was not all that surprising. Harry had learned that to be an auror, you had to get an O on your NEWTS, Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Test, which only about 15-20% of all students manage to achieve.

The new Professor for Defense Against the Dark Arts also knew how to teach. The man had an age-old method of instructing, but it worked well. He would often start his lessons with a lecture on the spell they were going to be learning, and would then call up one of the students to help him give a demonstration. This would be proceeded by having the group break into pairs and practice the spell on each other.

Harry had heard from Tonks that Professor Shacklebolt was a part-time

instructor that helped train their auror forces. It would explain why he was so good at instructing.

He was also very patient, which was always a plus when dealing with unruly children, and he managed to give lectures on spells in a way that kept those listening engaged and eagerly wanting to hear more.

This may have had something to do with his smooth, baritone voice. There was an almost hypnotic quality to it that Harry could not help but notice. If he didn't know any better, he would almost assume the new Defense instructor was using some kind of charm to compel them to listen.

Beside him, both Daphne and Blaise were dutifully taking notes. Though, his blond-haired friend seemed to be paying less attention to the lecture than Blaise was. Harry assumed this was because she already knew a lot about this particular charm. Daphne would always get bored and stop paying attention when their Professors were talking about something she already knew.

Behind them, the furious scribbling of quill on paper that Harry recognized as Hermione's handwriting by the speed and consistency could be heard over the din of the other students.

"No one knows who created the Disarming Charm," Professor Shacklebolt continued his lesson with only a minor pause for breath. "Some wizarding historians claim the spell may have been created by Merlin himself, others claim that its first use was in Madagascar in the 11th Century. Regardless of whether any of this is true, that doesn't change the fact that this spell only became more widely recognized and used in 1379, when Elizabeth Smudgling used it during a duel with Dartmoor."

Harry took a quick glance around the room, scanning and surveying those in the classroom out of the corners of his eyes. Most of the class was enraptured by Professor Shacklebolt's lecture. No surprise there, the man knew how to keep people's attention.

"As I've already mentioned, the Disarming Charm causes whatever your opponent is holding at the time to go flying into the air, high out of their

reach. Skilled practitioners of this spell can also make it so that whatever the person they cast the spell on is holding flies straight into their hand." Professor Shacklebolt looked over the crowd of eagerly listening faces before his eyes locked with Harry's. "Mr. Potter, perhaps you would be willing to come up here and help me give a demonstration?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said, standing up and quickly moving to the front of the class.

As he passed by Daphne's seat, the girl's hand gently brushed up against his robes, causing them to ruffle.

"Do you know this spell, Mr. Potter?" Professor Shacklebolt asked when Harry stopped several feet in front of him.

"I do," Harry admitted with a nod.

"Very good, then I want you to cast it at me."

With Professor Shacklebolt having given him the green light, Harry's wand was out in a flash. He quickly made the wand movements necessary, flowing smoothly through the pattern with practiced speed and efficiency.

"Expelliarmus!"

Harry made sure to call out the incantation. This was a demonstration of the spell, so it would not benefit the other students if they did not hear him speak. This lesson wasn't about silent casting anyways.

The wand in Professor Shacklebolt's left hand quickly proceeded to fly out of said appendage. It soared up into the air, well over the heads of all those present. The wand, flipping as it moved in a graceful parabolic arc, eventually came to rest in Harry Potter's outstretched hand.

"Excellent job, Mr. Potter!" Professor Shacklebolt praised as he took his wand back from Harry. Many people in the class also clapped at his performance, and a few, like Seamus and Dean, even gave a loud cheer or whistle. "You're very well-versed in this spell, it seems. Have you practiced it before?"

"During my first year, sir," Harry answered honestly. Professor Shacklebolt raised an eyebrow.

"It shows. You did a good job."

"Thank you, sir."

"You can go sit down now."

Harry nodded, and quickly returned to his seat, where he was greeted by Blaise and Daphne.

"Nice job," Blaise complimented.

"Thanks."

As Harry sat down, Daphne grabbed her quill and wrote a quick note on his muggle notebook. When Harry read the 'good job' on his paper, he turned and gave the girl a smile.

"Thanks, Daph."

Daphne returned his smile easily enough. Though it was much smaller than the one he gave her, it was still a very genuine smile filled with that warmth he had come to recognize from the girl. "You're welcome."

Professor Shacklebolt began his lecture after allowing the classes excitement at seeing such a useful spell die down. "I want you all to take note of the wand movements Mr. Potter made, a slanted downward slash, following by a spiral."

The new DADA Professor then showed the class the wand movements in a much slower manner than Harry had, moving the wand diagonally from his left shoulder to the center of his chest, then making the wand spiral ever inwards before making a slight thrusting motion, as if he were jabbing someone with it.

"It is important to get the wand movements right, just as it is equally imperative that you not mispronounce your incantation. Making either one or both of these mistakes could have disastrous consequences, for you

and for the person you are casting it on."

"But wouldn't it be better if the consequences were disastrous for the person we're casting the charm at?" asked Dean Thomas. Professor Shacklebolt gave an amused smile, as if he had been expecting that question.

"Not when you don't know exactly what those consequences would be," he answered, "And not when the person you are casting the charm at is a fellow classmate." It was with these words that Professor Shacklebolt led the group into the next phase of his lesson. "I want you all to partner up with somebody and begin practicing the spell."

The students stood up and began finding partners. Some people found it easier to find partners than others. Hermione and Tracey for example, paired up as soon as the announcement was given. Neville and Blaise also ended up paired together, and Harry and Daphne had long ago decided to become each others permanent partner for any paired assignments in this class. Dean Thomas also paired up with Seamus Finnegan, and Padme Patil and Lavender Brown selected each other to practice the Disarming Charm on.

Others did not have it so lucky. Draco Malfoy, for example, had some difficulty finding himself a partner. This was mainly due to the fact that he did not want either Crabbe or Goyle for his partner. It was well-known that both were the worst students in class. Merlin only knew what kind of disaster would befall the person on the business end of their wand.

When everyone had found themselves a partner, Professor Shacklebolt flicked his wand at the classroom. All of the desks were quickly and neatly rearranged, and then shoved back against the wall, leaving a good deal of free space within the center of the room. It was a practiced move that had Harry raising an eyebrow. He wondered if what the dark-skinned instructor had done was a single spell or a group of basic spells designed to look like he had cast one spell. It couldn't have been easy to move all those pieces of furniture. A modified levitation charm perhaps?

"I want all of you to line up on either side of the wall, facing your partner," Professor Shacklebolt instructed. When the class had done as he asked,

he continued giving instructions. "Now then, what you are going to do is take turns trying to cast the Expelliarmus spell. I'll be walking around to see which among you needs help. If you have any questions, don't be afraid to ask me. Now, begin."

The students were all soon doing their best to disarm their opponents using the Expelliarmus Charm. Most did not do very well. Dean couldn't seem to cast the spell, neither could Padme or Lavender. Seamus' attempt somehow exploded in his face, literally, and Crabbe and Goyle weren't even worth mentioning.

Surprisingly, Draco Malfoy, who had paired up with Theodore Nott, managed to get the spell correct on his third try. Harry could only assume that, like most pure-blood families, Draco had been getting private tutoring outside of school. It would explain why he was good in class, and he was good in class. Harry would not lie and say the boy was an idiot, at least as far as schoolwork went.

Too be he was an idiot in other ways. And a bully. They might have actually been friends otherwise.

"Expelliarmus."

The muttered words of Daphne were so quiet that Harry would have had trouble picking them up if it were not for his enhanced sense of hearing. As it was, he only just managed to catch them before his wand was yanked from his grasp and ended up flying into Daphne's outstretched palm.

"Nice," Harry complimented as he and Daphne walked towards each other. The blond-haired, blue-eyed girl handed his wand back to him. "I think you're the only person so far to get this spell right on your first try."

Daphne smiled, but it was one that showed she did not like where her mind was going. "Thank you. My father made me learn dueling to protect myself from... unruly suitors."

"Ah..."

Harry understood what she meant. Daphne had told him about how her

father often paraded her around in front of his 'friends' in the hopes of someone expressing interest in forming an alliance through marriage. He imagined there were a number of unscrupulous characters she met that would have no issue trying to 'sample the goods' as it were, regardless of the fact that she was still just a little girl.

There was a term for that in the mundane world: Pedophilia, a sickening fetish for people who had a thing for little girls.

He knew that the act 'sampling' a girl to see if they were suitable for marriage had something to do with tradition. Back during the Late Victorian period, and even further back during the start of the first Century, it was not unusual for most girls to be married by twelve and giving birth by thirteen. The lifespan of humans had been notoriously short back then. Most people were considered old if they reached the age of 45.

Of course, it was different for wizards. Even during the Victorian era where disease ran rampant and killed thousands of mundane humans, most wizards lived to be around 100 or even 200 years old. To them, finding suitors to marry their children off at a young age was simply tradition. If it isn't broken, don't fix it, as it were.

The only silver lining in all this was that the laws prevented a witch from marrying until she reached the age of majority, or seventeen. It was a relatively new law, one that had only been put in place within the last two decades.

Perhaps, not surprisingly, the one who manage to pass this law was none other than Albus Dumbledore.

It was this law that Harry was banking on to ensure no one touched Daphne until he could find some way to convince her father, either through trickery or force, to let her marry whoever she wanted.

"Harry..."

"Hmmm?" Harry blinked several times. His eyes refocused on Daphne, who was still standing right next to him. He blinked again when he saw the light dusting of pink that spread across her cheeks. "Yes? Something

wrong?"

Daphne looked down. For a second, Harry thought something was wrong.

"No... it's just... your hand..."

"My hand?"

Harry looked down as well... and then noticed that their hands were still touching from when Daphne had given his wand back.

"Oh..." Their hands quickly sprang apart like something had zapped them. Harry and Daphne shared a look. "Sorry about that."

"It's fine." Daphne looked back at Harry and smiled. "It's your turn to try and disarm me."

"Right."

The two quickly moved back into place. When they were facing each other from across the room, Harry's wand followed the motions necessary to cast the Expelliarmus.

Seconds later, Daphne's wand was in his hand.

He cast the spell complete silently.

"Excellent job, Mr. Potter." Professor Shacklebolt came up to the pair. He looked very impressed that a child no older than twelve knew how to cast silently. "I'm very impressed. Silent casting isn't taught until sixth year for a reason. Most people don't gain the required concentration until they're older."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said, nodding his head gratefully.

"Carry on, you two."

Professor Shacklebolt went off to help Seamus, whose face had turned black from all the soot on it. Harry handed Daphne her wand back.

"Show off," Tracey muttered as Harry got back into position. Said raven-haired youth looked at the brunette with a single, raised eyebrow.

"I don't know how you think I'm showing off. If I had wanted to show off, I would have caused a big scene by making extravagant wand gestures and blowing Daphne off her feet with an overpowered Disarming Charm. Not cast near silently and only used enough power to take her wand."

"Whatever, I still think you were just trying to show off in front of the new Professor."

Harry opened his mouth to speak, but was unable to say anything.

"Expelliarmus!"

Mainly because at that exact moment, a red beam of energy smashed into his chest, sending him sprawling to the ground.

Harry's eyes bulged as all the breath was knocked from his lungs with startling suddenness. He tried to suck in some oxygen, but couldn't. It was like all the air had been squeezed out of him, like a giant had grabbed him in a large fist and was squeezing him like tube of toothpaste.

"Harry!"

Several blinks later, beautiful blue eyes and long blond hair came into view.

"Harry! Harry! Speak to me, Harry! Are you alright?!"

"Way to go Daph, you just killed Harry Potter."

"Shut up, Tracey!"

"Woah! Don't bite my head off. I was just kidding."

"Ha... you really need to learn to think before you speak... is he alright?"

Harry opened his mouth to say something, but without oxygen in his

lungs, all he was able to do was wheeze.

"I don't know!" Daphne cried, turning her attention back to him. This was the first time he had ever seen her express so much emotion in one go. That night in front of the Mirror of Erisad notwithstanding. "Oh, Harry! I'm so sorry! So, so sorry! I was so busy trying to cast the spell silently that I didn't even realize you weren't paying attention!"

It was actually kind of cute to see Daphne so worried about him, though, the whole thing was kind of ruined by the fact that he was having trouble *breathing*.

He would have said something to let her know he was fine, but since he couldn't speak at the moment, all he was able to do was lay there as Daphne placed his head in her lap and began gently running a hand through his hair. Whether this was done in an effort to sooth him or her own frazzled nerves, he couldn't say.

"Is everything alright over here," Professor Shacklebolt's voice could be heard, though, Harry could not see him. "Mr. Potter, are you okay?"

A face appeared above Daphne's. Harry could just barely make out dark skin and dark eyes with a purple hat.

"I'm fine." Harry coughed several times as oxygen finally came to him. As he tried pushing himself off the ground, Daphne helped him sit up, placing a hand on his back. Coughing several more times, the young, raven-haired wizard looked at all of the people surrounding him. "I'm fine," he spoke more confidently. "I just had the wind knocked out of me, that's all."

"Are you sure you're okay, Harry?" Daphne asked. Her voice was thick with concern, as was the look in her eyes.

"I am fine," Harry smiled at Daphne, who returned his smile an uncertain with one of her own. "Sorry for not paying attention. I was... distracted."

Daphne shook her head. "Not your fault. I blame Tracey."

"Oi! There's no need to be mean!" Tracey puffed up her cheeks. "It's not

my fault Harry wasn't paying any attention! He should be more aware of his surroundings." She nodded to herself. "Mm mmm. It's his own fault for letting himself getting caught off guard like that."

"You mean like this! Expelliarmus!"

"OOF!"

XoX

"I think I've got a new favorite class!" Terry gushed during lunch. The young man was sitting in between Neville and Hannah, his plate filled with pork and sweat rolls. "Professor Shacklbolt is such an amazing teacher. I think I've learned more form him today then I have in the past year and a half for that class!"

Tracey snorted into her ham sandwich. "Sounds like someone's got a bit of a boy-crush on the new Defense Professor."

"Shut it, Davis!"

"Make me!"

Terry and Tracey started trading insults and arguing. Hannah, who was sitting in the middle of the pair, looked like she wasn't sure whether she should crawl under the table or disappear into her robes.

The others felt very sorry for her.

"Professor Shacklbolt is a pretty good teacher," Susan said in her soft way of speaking. "I actually managed to learn the Expelliarmus Charm after only a few tries. Normally, I can only pick up spells like that when Harry is the one helping me."

Several eyes turned to Harry, who looked at Susan when she mentioned his name. The girl flushed a bit under his gaze, but did not react otherwise.

"I'm not surprised," he said when he realized his friends were expecting him to say something. "Professor Shacklebolt is an auror, a professional

Dark Wizard catcher. I'm sure he has a lot of experience with defensive charms and spells."

"You guys talking about Shack?"

All eyes turned towards the new voice. Tonks grinned at the group. She made to sit down next to them... but ended up tripping on... something, no one was quite sure what since there was nothing for her to trip over aside from her own two feet. Either way, the end result was her falling into Harry's back, whose quick reflexes and magically enhanced strength kept him from faceplanting into his food.

"Tonks," Harry sighed as his arms strained a bit to keep their combined weight up after fighting against Newton's Third Law of Motion, "still as clumsy as ever, I see."

A small tint of red spread across the embarrassed Tonks' face.

"Sorry, Harry."

Harry just sighed again. "It's fine. I'm pretty used to you falling on top of me by now."

Tonks' face became even more red.

"So you two really do know each other?" asked Susan, who was probably the most curious of the group. She knew Tonks, or at least knew of her, thanks to her Auntie.

She then blinked as her mind registered the rest of Harry's statement.

"And what do you mean you're used to her falling on top of you?"

Tonks opened her mouth to answer, but Harry beat her to it. "Tonks here is the clumsiest person I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. The very first time we met, she ended up tripping on air and crashed right into me." The red on Tonks' face deepened in hue. "It didn't help that she was on the second floor when she tripped. The second time we met, she tripped coming out of the flu and fell on me again." While the metamorph in question was trying to hide her face in her robes, Harry said said woman

a speculative look. "I have often wondered if this was just her way of greeting others, but it only seems to happen to me."

"Wow." Tracey stopped arguing with Terry long enough to look at the blushing metamorph. "You're a klutz."

"Shut up," Tonks mumbled. Maybe it was because she was a shape-shifter, but her face had actually turned a boiling red color.

"So how did you two meet?" asked Daphne. She was frowning at the older girl. She could have sworn she had heard the name Tonks before now.

"Her mother is my solicitor," Harry answered.

"Ah." Now Daphne remembered where she heard that name. Tonks & Tonks was a very famous, or infamous depending on who you asked, soliciting company owned by Andromeda and Theodore Tonks. They were well-known for taking cases in both the wizarding and muggle worlds.

She hoped Harry knew what he was doing by working with them, and that using them wouldn't come back to bite him in the backside.

"You guys were talking about Shack, right?" Tonks said quickly, no doubt hoping to change the subject before Harry said something that embarrassed her further. This was probably him getting revenge on her for constantly falling on top of him. Though, just how he could blame her natural clumsiness on her was beyond the metamorphmagus.

"Yes!" Terry spoke up at the mention of his new favorite teacher.

"Professor Shacklebolt is an amazing teacher! I learned more in one class with him than all the rest of time I've spent in DADA combined."

Tracey coughed into her hand. "Fanboy!"

"At least I'm a fan of someone who's competent!" Terry spat, his face red.

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Tracey sent Terry an angry glare.

"Only that Professor Shacklebolt is a far better teacher than that buffoon Lockhart ever was!"

"You take that back! Professor Lockhart was an awesome teacher!"

"Yeah, awesome at teaching us nothing!"

"Do they always argue like that?" asked Tonks as the pair began trading insults and barbs once again. When everyone just nodded, a small trickle of sweat ran down the side of her face. "I see. So!" Deciding to just ignore the arguing duo, she turned to the others with a cheerful smile plastered on her face. "You guys' like Shack?"

"He is a really good teacher," Lisa nodded her head.

"I like him," the quirky Luna declared. "He doesn't have any Nargles." She paused, her large, protuberant eyes looking up towards the ceiling in thought. "I think that's why he's such a good teacher. Without any Nargles buzzing around and causing his head to go all wonky, he can actually teach. Not at all like Professor Snape. That man has more Nargles than anyone I've ever seen."

Tonks looked over at Harry with a distinct 'what the bloody hell is this girl talking about?' expression on her face.

"There's no such thing as nargles," Hermione muttered grumpily. In an almost violent motion, she stabbed her fork into some yams, then yanked it out and shoved the food in her mouth.

"Yes there are."

Hermione glared at Luna, who was just calmly eating her food. "No, there aren't."

"Yes there are."

"No there aren't!"

"No there aren't."

"Yes there are!" Hermione blinked, then flushed red as several snickers escaped from the mouths of Tracey, Hannah, Susan and Lisa. "I mean, no there aren't."

"Yes, well," Lisa coughed into her hand as she tried to get their conversation back on track. And before Luna could confound her bookwormish friend again. "I do think Professor Shacklebolt is the best teacher we've had for DADA. He might even be just as good a teacher as Professor Flitwick."

Several nods met her statement. Professor Flitwick was a favorite of the students. He had a sense of humor and managed to keep classes engaging. He wasn't strict, but he was stern when needed. Nothing at all like the other teachers.

"Yeah, Shack's pretty cool," Tonks smiled. "He's actually my teacher."

"Wait, you're learning from him?" When Tonks nodded, Hermione frowned. "But aren't you an auror too?"

"Well, yeah, but I'm new to the force," Tonks replied. "I don't know everything there is to know about being an auror."

"I thought you all went through training, though. You know, to learn everything you need to know about being a Dark Wizard catcher."

"All new cadets do go through basic training," Tonks began to say, "But basic training can only take you so far. Madame Bones believes that you can't learn everything in a classroom, or even in simulation runs. That's why she's created the new apprenticeship program."

"Apprenticeship program?" Neville perked up.

"Yep! The new apprenticeship program basically puts new auror cadets with one of the more experienced aurors to learn from them on the field. It's her belief that the best lessons taught come from learning through experience."

"Trial by fire," Harry added, "It's a commonly used concept, especially in a profession like yours. I know that muggle armies tend to use live-fire

exercises to train raw recruits on how to handle getting shot at by the enemy. They use blank bullets, but the concept is the same."

"Bullets?"

Harry looked at Blaise, then shook his head. "That's right, purebloods don't know about muggle weapons. Bullets are a type of metal shell that is fired from a handheld device at extreme speeds in order to penetrate flesh. They're very deadly weapons, and can easily kill a witch or wizard if they are not careful."

"Sounds... unpleasant," Blaise grimaced.

"It certainly is."

"So how do you like the class, Harry?" asked Tonks, who was curious to know what the enigmatic 'leader' of this little group thought.

"I think Professor Shacklebolt is a consummate professional who knows what he is doing and is a very competent teacher," Harry answered diplomatically. After several seconds of having Tonks continue staring at him, he added, "Though I do wish he would instruct us on more complicated spells and spell-casting. I'm particularly interested in learning about chaining spells together and the best methods for coming up with my own spell-chains."

Tonks nearly gawked at him. "That's some pretty advanced stuff there, Harry," she eyed the young boy strangely. "Hogwarts doesn't actually teach spell-chaining. You do know that, right?"

Harry's shoulder's slumped. "I know..."

"That's Harry for you," Terry and Tracey said at the exact same time. They then looked at each other and began glaring at each other.

"And that's Tracey and Terry for you," Lisa commented.

"Just like an old married couple," Hermione added.

Terry and Tracey balked at being compared to a married couple. An OLD

married couple. They acted nothing like a married couple! And they were certainly not old!

Daphne nodded her head in agreement. "They're both idiots."

While Terry flushed red in embarrassment, Tracey pouted at friend.

"That's mean, Daph..."

Daphne just sniffed. "And yet it's no less true."

"...Meanie."

"Did you say something?" asked Daphne.

"...No. Nothing."

The blond girl nodded her head. "I thought not."

XoX

Albus Dumbledore looked around his office, studying all of the nicknacks and objects he had acquired in his long life. Many of them were useless, a good few did nothing more than whiz and whirl, puff and wheeze. They were merely trinkets he had found during his travels that amused him.

A repressed sigh escaped from beneath his beard. With an almost absentmindedness, he waved his hand at the bookcase. A mild scraping sounded out as the bookcase moved on well-oiled hinges, revealing a small cabinet filled with several different brands of alcohol both wizard and mundane, and a couple of shot glasses.

Another wave and three shot glasses along with a bottle of Ogdens whiskey floated to his desk, setting themselves down in front of him and the two other seats he had arranged in front of the desk.

Unscrewing the bottle the mundane way, the Headmaster of Hogwarts poured himself a glass of Ogdens whiskey. He set the bottle back down, leaving it uncapped, grabbed the shot glass and downed the dark amber liquid in one go.

As the alcohol burned its way down his throat and made steam pour out of his ears, Fawkes crooned in what could only be a questioning tone.

"Even I need something to help me relax on occasion, old friend," Dumbledore spoke to the Phoenix. He released another sigh, then poured himself another glass. This time, he merely sipped at it. "I am getting tired. This matter with the Chamber of Secrets and the petrification is an exhausting affair, and I am not as young as I used to be."

Fawkes crooned again, this time the sound was more soothing and helped ease the ache in Dumbledore's bones that came with age and stress.

A knock at the door sounded. Dumbledore knew who was on the other end. Even without his wards, he would have known who was there. He had been expecting them.

"Come in!"

The door opened to reveal both Alastor Moody and Severus Snape. Loud clanking sounded out as the mutilated auror walked in, his wooden peg-leg tapping and scraping against the ground. Albus' potions professor followed in behind the auror with the fake eye, shutting the door behind him.

"Thank you for coming, you two," Albus Dumbledore said, pouring both of them a glass of Ogdens whiskey. Severus Snape grabbed the glass as soon as the amber liquid had finished pouring and downed the drink in a single gulp, steam pouring out of his ears as he did so. Alastor 'Mad-Eye' Moody on the other hand, put the beverage up to his nose and sniffed it before drinking.

Albus threw his old friend a mildly exasperated look.

"Is that really necessary?"

"You can never be too careful, Dumbledore," Alastor growled out in his gnarled voice. "Anyone could have poisoned this before you got it. You should always show **CONSTANT VIGILANCE!**"

"Considering I got that bottle before my rise to prominence, I don't expect it to have been poisoned," Albus commented just a tad dryly.

"Let the paranoid fool do what he pleases, Dumbledore," Severus sneered. "If he wants to jump at shadows, that's his choice."

"Says the Death Eater."

While Severus glared at Alastor with thin-slitted eyes, Albus tried to be the voice of reason. "You know that Severus has my full trust, Alastor. He is on the same side that we are." When the old, mangled auror just grumbled, the Headmaster sighed and decided to get down to business before a possible fight could break out between the two. "Have either of you discovered anything?"

"Not a thing," Moody growled, taking another sip of his whiskey now that he was positive it wasn't poisoned. "If Lucius has any aurors here in his pocket, they are keeping it to themselves. I haven't caught a hint of anyone acting suspiciously." This did not seem to sit well with Alastor, who glared down at the desk with his real eye while the other one moved erratically in his socket. "I suspect that if there are any aurors here that work for that Death Eater scum, they are merely here to observe and inform Lucius only when something drastic happens that he can use whatever tragedy he expects to bolster his image and throw yours in the mud."

"I see," Albus Dumbledore hid his frustration well. It bothered him to think that there might be aurors working for Lucius in Hogwarts, but there wasn't anything he could do without concrete proof. His word and reputation was powerful in the magical community, but not that powerful. "Severus?"

"Except for Draco Malfoy's boasting, I have heard nothing that may be of use to you," Severus answered with the same sneer he usually had, though it was toned down quite a bit. "I doubt we will find out anything that could help us from my snakes. They are as ignorant as the rest of the school."

"I suspected as much," Dumbledore admitted. "It was a long shot that any of them would know anything."

"What about you, Albus?" Alastor leaned his elbows on the table after finishing off his whiskey to fix the older man with a stare that would have unnerved anyone else. "Have you managed to find out what petrified that fop, Lockhart?"

Albus nearly snorted at the tone Alastor used when calling Lockhart a fop. The auror's opinion of that man had never been very high. Then again, anyone who was in the know didn't have a very high opinion of Gilderoy Lockhart.

"I have not."

This time, Dumbledore couldn't quite hide the vexation in his voice. He should have figured out what was responsible for the petrification by now. That he hadn't bothered him, especially because he was sure that he could have discovered what it was by now if he had even one more piece to this puzzle.

"When Tom Riddle opened the Chamber of Secrets so many years ago, the creature within it killed a girl. Yet there was no markings on her body, no signs of how she died. It was as if she had just dropped dead on the spot." Albus Dumbledore paused to collect his thoughts. "I suspected then that the monster within the chamber was a Basilisk."

"There is a Basilisk within this school?!" Severus actually looked mildly alarmed by this news. "Why hasn't anything been done about it before now?!"

"Because taking care of the Basilisk would require getting into the Chamber of Secrets," Albus answered easily. "And none but the Heir of Slytherin can get into the chamber. Tom Riddle did not have any children, therefore there is no one in the castle who can get into the chamber, much less control the Basilisk into doing their bidding."

Having finished his drink, Albus poured himself another glass, his fourth.

"What's more, all of the attacks so far have been petrification. A Basilisk's stare is deadly to all who see it. Had the Basilisk been responsible for the attacks, Mrs. Norris and Professor Lockhart would have been dead." Sipping at his whiskey, Dumbledore looked down at a book resting on his

desk. "I suspect the Basilisk is currently in hibernation. They can sleep for thousands of years before waking up again."

There was a moment of silence as all three sat there, lost in their own thoughts. The problem set before them was a vexing one. They did not have enough information to make any truly informed conclusions. Certainly not enough to act on. It was enough to rankle all three of them.

"So what can we do?" Severus broke the silence with his question.

"There isn't much we can do, lad," Alastor growled, tapping his wooden leg against the floor. "Without any evidence, we can't even get a warrant to search Lucius' house, much less one for his arrest. And without knowing what we're up against here, we can't do anything against whoever is behind these attacks."

Severus glared at the floor.

"For now, I suggest we all simply keep our eyes open," Dumbledore said, his fingers steepled in front of him as he propped his elbows on the desk. "Whoever is behind these attacks will eventually slip, and we need to be ready for them when they do."

"Unless they've gone to ground," Alastor said, "They could have decided to lay low while the aurors are around."

"They could have," Dumbledore agreed, "But if it was an imperioused student, as I am beginning to suspect may be correct, then they would not have the mental capacity to know when prudence is required."

Severus nodded in agreement. "People who are put under the Imperious Curse can only do as they are ordered unless the person who cast it on them is near to change those orders." He knew that from experience. "If the person responsible is someone under the Imperious Curse, they'll attack someone again regardless of the aurors."

"True enough," Alastor conceded their point with a scowl. "Then I guess all we can do is wait for them to slip up." His scowl deepened. "I hate just waiting to be attacked. There is too much that could go wrong."

"Agreed," Dumbledore said, "But for now, that is all we can do."

XoX

The days began to pass by quickly and school continued on as per usual. There had been no attacks since Lockhart's petrification. It seemed that whoever had attacked the hapless former Defense Professor and Mrs. Norris had decided to lay low while the aurors were there. By now, every student had been questioned at least once, along with the teachers, yet none had given any indication that they were the responsible for the two attacks.

With no evidence to suggest that the attacker was even still in Hogwarts, the aurors that had been stationed at the school for the students safety were forced to admit defeat. They would be leaving with the students for Christmas break. Only Professor Shacklebolt would be staying.

On December 20th, the day the students and aurors would be leaving, Harry Potter woke up early, just like he always did. A slight chill caused a few goosebumps to break out on his flesh as the covers slid off him and he climbed out of the bed. His magic soon adjusted to the sudden shift in temperature, however, and his body warmed up quickly.

Neville Longbottom was still asleep. Without being allowed to go out and exercise, the round-faced boy had decided to simply sleep in like he used to. Hopefully, Harry's friend wouldn't become lax and stop exercising even after the aurors had left.

He made his way down the staircase after getting dressed in a pair of black work out pants and skin tight under armor, along with strapping his wand holster to the underside of his forearm. When he got downstairs, Harry was about to make his way towards the door when he noticed something unusual out of the corner of his eyes: Ginny Weasley was sleeping on the couch.

Harry paused, his eyes staring as he tried to decide what to do. If she was sleeping there, she must have been there all night. He knew that she had stayed up pretty late the night before, she had been sitting on that couch when he had gone to bed. Should he wake her up?

Deciding that he couldn't just leave the girl there, Harry walked over to where the young red head was sleeping. He stopped in front of the couch, looking down at her. Ginny was lying on her side, her legs curled close to her chest. As he continued looking at the girl, trying to figure out the best way to wake her, his eyes caught sight of something she was holding.

A book?

Harry knelt down. It was a very nondescript book with purple covering and no letters of any kind to indicate what it was. A diary, perhaps?

Shaking his head, Harry placed a hand on Ginny's shoulder and began shaking her.

"Ginny. Ginny. Ginerva Weasely. Wake up."

The girl's eyes fluttered, slowly at first, before eventually opening to reveal brown eyes. Blinking several times, those eyes seemed completely unfocused, glazed over even. Then they sharpened, coming to rest on Harry.

A long silence ensued.

"Are you alright?" asked Harry as the girl seemed incapable of speaking. In fact, she looked rather petrified at that moment, lying there, staring at him with wide eyes. "You really should be sleeping in your dorm, you know?"

"Eep!"

The loud squeak had Harry stumbling back, a good thing too, as not a moment later Ginny shot up from the couch.

"H-Harry!" Her voice was squeaky, surprised, almost frightened. "W-What are you doing here?"

Harry raised an eyebrow.

"I could ask you the same question. It's not a very good idea to sleep on

the couch like that, especially when you've got a comfortable bed in the dorms."

"Oh... um... r-right..." The girl stuttered. Harry raised another eyebrow. He had never spoken with the youngest Weasley so maybe that's why he found her manner of speech so unusual, but he could swear she was having trouble speaking to him. "A-Anyways, I-I need to go!"

Harry watched the girl, clutching that book to her chest, with a small frown. Maybe it was just him, but the girl looked awfully tired. He wondered if she was getting enough sleep. Maybe that was why she had fallen asleep on the couch before she could get to her bed, exhaustion.

Shrugging, he stood back up and began making his way to the exit. Whatever problem she had wasn't any of his business.

The portrait swung open, allowing Harry to step out of the common room.

Tonks was waiting for him.

"Morning to ya, Harry!" The older girl greeted with a bright smile.

"Morning, Tonks," Harry returned the smile with one of his own. After the aurors had come, he had not been able to do his usual exercises. Wanting to rectify this problem, he had spoken with Tonks and asked if she would be willing to accompany him on his morning work outs.

She had readily agreed. Tonks, it seemed, was actually used to getting up first thing in the morning thanks to her auror training. She had gone with him every morning since then, doing her own work outs while he did his.

There was another benefit to having Tonks exercise with him as well.

"Got your wand ready?"

As an auror who had already gone through basic training and was apprenticed to Kingsley Shacklebolt, she was a very skilled duelist.

"Of course," Harry said, tapping his wand holster for emphasis. "You think

I would forget to bring my wand when this will be our last duel? I still have yet to beat you, and this could very well be my last chance."

He had never won a single of their matches in the time they had begun dueling. While Harry was athletic and very skilled for his age, Tonks was experienced and possessed a much wider range of defensive and offensive spells. She was also better at chain linking spells together than he was, giving her a huge advantage over him.

"You're going to have to be disappointed," Tonks teased, "You're still a hundred years too young to beat me."

Harry narrowed his eyes at the challenge that had been just laid down. Now he had to beat Tonks, if only to prove to the girl that he was every bit as good as she was.

"We'll see."

XoX

The first thought Luna Lovegood had upon waking was that today would be a good day. Sure, she was leaving Hogwarts, which had become a second home to her, but it would be nice to see her daddy again. Maybe they would even get to go hunting for the Crumple-Horned Snorkack during the winter holidays. That would be exciting.

Her seconds thoughts were centered around her time at Hogwarts. Despite her year starting off roughly, with Nargles constantly stealing things from her trunk and people infected with Whackspurts being mean to her, her time at school had smoothed out and become very pleasant. The Nargles now seemed to avoid her and the people infected by Whackspurts had stopped being mean.

She believed it had something to do with her friends, Harry Potter and the others.

They were surprisingly Nargle and Whackspurt free.

Getting out of bed, Luna began her daily ritual, finishing off with her dressed in her school robes and wearing her butterbear cap necklace

and her wand behind her ear. Humming a most unusual tune, she skipped her way down to the Great Hall for breakfast. Her friends would most likely already be there.

Finding her friends was easy. They were a very large group made up of mixed colors. She supposed that happened when you had a bunch of people from different houses sitting together. Luna didn't dwell on that thought for long, and with a skip in her step, she walked over to the group.

She was just in time to catch the tail end of what sounded like an interesting conversation.

"...Stop skulking, Harry, it's unbecoming."

"I'm surprised you know what unbecoming even means."

"What's that supposed to mean, Boot?!"

"Only that you don't take me as the studious type who would use such vocabulary."

"I'll have you know that I'm incredibly smart!"

"Oh yeah? Then how come you're always getting into trouble for running off at the mouth?"

"...Shut up."

As Luna Lovegood got closer, she took in the people sitting before her. Terry and Tracey were arguing again. No surprise their. Out of all her friends, those two were the ones who had to deal with Whackspurt infestations the most. On another note, Daphne and, surprisingly enough, Susan seemed to be comforting a sulking Harry Potter.

Now there was a surprise. Harry Potter sulking? She wondered if he was having a Whackspurt infestation as well? Or maybe it was Nargles? They were devious creatures, after all.

"Is it really a big deal that you lost?" asked Hannah. "I mean, Tonks is an

auror, you know? She has a lot more experience than you."

Harry mumbled something that Luna couldn't hear, but Daphne and Susan managed to pick up. The blond-haired, blue-eyed girl rolled her eyes, her lips quirking in amusement. Susan, on the other hand, just smiled indulgently, as if she found Harry's words both amusing and sad.

"You really shouldn't be so hard on yourself, Harry," the red head said consolingly. "Hannah's right, Tonks is an auror, and she may have beat you, but you still gave her a good runaround."

Harry mumbled something else, which caused Daphne to pet his head and say, "There, there, Harry. It'll be alright."

Finally, Harry lifted his head from between his arms to stare at Daphne. Luna couldn't be sure, but it almost looked like Harry Potter was giving her a childish pout. "You're being patronizing."

Daphne smiled at him. "Just a little."

"Good morning everyone!" Luna said brightly as she sat down. They all turned to her, each giving their own greeting before going back to their own conversations. She couldn't pick up everything they were saying, but being closest to Blaise and Hermione, could hear their conversation. It sounded like they were talking about some kind of complicated theory about something called electricity. She didn't know what that was, but it sounded dangerous.

"Are you okay, Harry?" she turned to look at Harry, who was definitely sulking and pouting like a child now that she got a closer look at him. He was definitely infected by Nargles. Everyone knew Harry Potter did not pout. "Would you like me to make you a butterbear cap necklace?"

Harry blinked, nonplussed. "Why would I need a butterbear cap necklace?"

"For the Nargles, of course," Luna shook her head at him. Honestly, he should know how problematic those creatures could be by now. She had told him plenty of times, but maybe he just didn't think about them because he was usually Nargle-free. It was some food for thought

anyways. "You have a lot of them buzzing around you this morning. They're what's making you act all wonky."

"Is that so?"

"Oh yes," Luna nodded, "You have a very large concentration of them. I can see them buzzing around even now."

"There's no such thing as Nargles," Hermione ceased her conversation with Blaise to glare at Luna.

Luna? Well, she just shook her head sadly. This girl didn't understand the danger Nargles represented. Out of all those there, she had the highest concentration of Nargles buzzing around her, probably because she was muggleborn and didn't have the proper protections.

But then, Draco Malfoy had the highest concentration of Nargles among the students, and he was a pure-blood, so maybe there was another reason.

"Don't start that again, you two," Lisa said. "It's too early in the morning to listen to you arguing about the existence of Nargles."

Luna frowned a bit, but conceded the point. It was very early, and she hadn't had breakfast yet. She was hungry. Trying to convince Hermione about the existence of Nargles could wait until she had her fill of food.

Blaise, wanting to get back to his conversation with Hermione, grabbed the girl's attention again. "You mentioned something about energy resulting from the motion of charged particles. How does that work? And what is a charged particle exactly?"

Eager to start explaining the concepts of science, Hermione turned back to her conversation with Blaise "A charged particle is a particle with an electric charge, which is how muggles create energy to power things like stoves, lights and other appliances. It's created by..."

Luna stopped paying attention to their conversation after Hermione began going more in depth with her explanation. She wasn't interested in subatomic Adam or Ion something or others. What did Adam and Ion

have to do with electricity anyways?

"Where's Tonks?" she asked of the others. "She normally sits with us during breakfast, but I don't see her anywhere."

At the mention of Tonks, Harry slumped further into depression. Susan gave the boy a look of exasperation and pity while Daphne was just exasperation.

"Last I saw her she was being lectured by Moody," Susan informed Luna, even as she rubbed Harry's back in a comforting manner. "Apparently, he did not like the idea of her taking Harry and us into an unused classroom to practice spells in the morning." She bit her lip worryingly. "Something about it being dangerous and showing a lack of constant vigilance, I think."

"He said that what Tonks had done was irresponsible and showed a distinct lack of reasoning," Daphne elaborated in her usual tone. "He also mentioned that she needed to have constant vigilance at all times when there was a potential killer on the loose, and that mucking around with students would dull her senses."

"I think that man's got a few screws loose, personally," Tracey added.

"Yeah, well, he would have to, wouldn't he?" said Terry. "I mean, just look at the man. You don't get injuries like that and not expect to come out without losing some of your sanity."

"True."

"Gran says it's because of all the battles he's been in," Neville added. "I imagine that being nearly killed several times has simply made him paranoid."

"Well, he could stand to be a little less paranoid," Tracey huffed. "I saw him nearly assaulting a first year because he thought the boy was carrying some kind of muggle explosive or something. The poor kid looked like he was going to be traumatized for life."

"I'm surprised you know what the word means."

"Oh, you know what, Boot! You can just shove off!"

"Alright you two," Lisa reached over the table and stuck a hand between the pair. "I think you've argued enough for one morning. Why don't you both take a time out."

"He started it/she started it!" The two shouted at the same time. They both turned to glare at each other, then just as quickly looked away with a huff.

Lisa sighed. "Honestly..."

Luna focused mostly on her meal after that. She was hungry, her stomach was gurgling most unpleasantly. She piled several scoops of eggs and a couple breakfast rolls onto her plate and began eating.

After breakfast, Professor Dumbledore, who had come down this morning to see the students off, stood up from his seat and gave them all a beaming smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"I hope all of you have had an educational and enjoyable experience this semester despite the hardships we have faced," he said, his voice ringing pleasantly through the hall. "It is also my hope that you have a great holiday filled with lots of joy in the company of family. Now, since you are all fed and watered, I would like you to follow the aurors as they escort you to the Hogwarts Express. Prefects, it will be your job to help the younger years. I wish you all a safe journey home."

As Dumbledore's small speech came to an end, Luna stood up with the rest of her friends and they all headed towards the entrance doors to the Great Hall in an orderly fashion.

Yes, Luna decided as she and the others began making their way into the Thestral drawn carriages, today was definitely going to be a good day.

Before I forget, does anyone here have a facebook or twitter account? If so, do not be afraid to friend request or follow me! If you want to find my facebook, there is a link on my profile page or you can just search for Brandon Varnell on Facebook, just look for the

dude living in Arizona. I'll probably be the first person on the list. If you want to follow me on twitter, again, there is a link to my account on my profile here on FFN or you can type BrandonBVarrell to find me.

The Face of the Enemy

BIG NEWS! I've got what is quite possibly the biggest news since humans learned the earth was not flat!

Okay, so it's not that big, but I do have pretty important news for you guys.

By now I'm sure you know that I've been working on publishing a novel. Well, guess what? That novel is now officially published! That's right, the novel is now available in both paperback and Kindle eBook on Amazon. This is the first step into a new journey that I hope all of you will join me on. I know this is asking a lot, but I was hoping all of you would support me by ordering a copy (or if you're too young to have a credit card, getting your parents to order a copy), either Kindle or paperback, and reading it. There is a link to my books Amazon page on my profile. If you don't want to use the link just type in American Kitsune or A Fox's Love on Amazon's main webpage and it should take you right to it.

If you need any incentive to order yourself a copy, then today is my birthday, I just turned 25 as of a few hours ago, and no gift could be greater than knowing that the people who have read my fanfictions are now reading my first original novel.

Thank you all for supporting me!

P.S. I know some of you may be worried that I'll stop writing fanfiction now that I'm a published author. You can stop. There are only a few ways I would ever stop writing fanfiction and publishing a book isn't one of them.

Chapter 20: The Face of the Enemy

"66...67...68..."

Harry Potter grit his teeth, air whistling through the small gap in between

his teeth as he breathed in and out with even, if slightly ragged, breaths.

"69...70...71..."

Sweat seeped out of his pores, coating his skin in a light, slick sheen and causing his clothes to cake to his skin. Several small droplets of salty water ran across his back, torso and down his arms.

"72...73...74..."

His muscles were aching with each contraction they made. There was a burning in his stomach as the fibers that made up his abdominals flexed and un-flexed.

"75...76...77..."

Attached to Harry's feet were a set of unusual looking boots. They were black, but had a silvery sheen to them. They were also quite large, much larger than your average, every day pair of boots. Then there was the apparatus on the bottom of the boots, a strange looking clamp made from steel. It gleamed brightly as the first rays of the morning light hit it.

"78...79...80..."

This steel clamp just so happened to be attached to one of the many monkey bars located in the park.

"81...82...83..."

He was hanging upside down.

"84...85...86..."

The boots were one of Harry's many new inventions designed to increase the difficulty of his work outs. Made from alchemy, they were probably the second most difficult item he had ever designed due to the composition of the material and the need to hold an innate understanding of the locking mechanism attached to the bottom. It wouldn't do if the locks didn't work and he ended up falling on his head.

"98...99...1...100!"

Incapable of doing anymore, Harry's torso dropped, along with his arms. He hung there, upside down, his torso heaving as he gasped for breath. Who knew doing crunches upside down while wearing a weighted vest that was over 30 lbs could be so strenuous?

Several minutes later, Harry was no longer hanging upside down. Several more minutes found him walking to Lisa's house, where he was, of course, staying at for the winter holidays. In his arms were the two new items he had made via alchemy for his work outs. The first were the boots, the second was a large vest with numerous pockets that were designed to fit several different kinds of weights in them. He was quite proud of both inventions, especially his vest. Now he wouldn't need to have anyone sit on him to increase the difficulty of his push-ups...and he could wear them when doing upside down crunches and just about any other exercise he did.

It wasn't very long after arriving at the Crawft's residence that Harry was showered, dressed, and helping Missus Crawft in the kitchen as she prepared breakfast. Today she was making waffles with eggs and hash-browns. It was a decidedly American breakfast.

"I think we're just about done here," Missus Crawft said with amicable smile as she looked at Harry. "Harry, could you be a dear and set the table?"

"Yes, ma'am."

It was while Harry was setting the table that Lisa Crawft came into the room. She looked kinda like a zombie, stumbling in with half-lidded eyes and her hair an uncombed mess. She was still wearing what she had slept in, an overly large shirt with a neck-hole so large that the left side of her shirt had slid down to show off her shoulder and a cute pair of pink flannel pants.

Harry thought she had never looked more beautiful.

A second later he was shaking his head fiercely, trying to banish both his thoughts and his blush. What the hell was wrong with him!? This was

Lisa! His best friend and sister in all but blood! He couldn't be thinking about her like that! To think about Lisa that way...it was wrong!

"Morning, Harry," Lisa graced him with a sleepy smile as she sat down at the exact moment he set a plate in front of her. Harry's heart skipped a beat.

"Good morning, Lisa," at least his voice remained even despite the feeling of his heart wanting to beat it's way out of his chest. He supposed there was a silver lining to that, but at the moment, he just couldn't see it. "Did you sleep well?"

"Hmm," Lisa nodded while Harry sat right next to her. "I did. What about you?" She looked him over with a critical, albeit, still half-asleep, eyes. "You woke up early again, didn't you?"

"I always wake up early. You know that."

"Do I ever," Lisa exclaimed, shaking her head. "You've been doing that for as long as I've known you. And you were probably exercising too, weren't you? I don't know why you push yourself so hard. You've already got more muscles than any of the boys your age, maybe even the boys several years older than you."

"Because I like to feel good about myself," Harry answered with a shrug. "A healthy body begets a healthy life and helps people feel confident about themselves. Both are important, I think."

"Whatever."

"Still, it can't be that healthy, can it?" Lisa and Harry looked up as Missus Crawft walked in with a large tray of food. She set it down on the table and looked at Harry. "I've seen how...built you are. I don't know if that's, well, it just doesn't seem very natural for a young boy your age to have muscles like that."

"What can I say? I have good genes." Yeah, magical genes.

"I don't know if your genetics have anything to do with this," Missus Crawft replied just a tad dryly. "But I won't press further if you don't want

to tell me. Just be careful, okay? Exercising as much as you do can't be healthy for you. There is such a thing as too much exercise, you know."

"I know, and don't worry, I'll be careful."

"Good," Missus Crawft smiled at the pair as she poured a cup of coffee for herself and her husband, who had yet to wake up. "So are you two excited for today?"

"Today?" Lisa stopped herself halfway from serving herself a waffle and looked up at her mom. "Is there something going on today?"

"You don't remember?"

"Remember what...oh..." Lisa's entire countenance seemed to darken for a second. A scowl marred her cute face as she remembered what was happening today. "I forgot about that."

"You don't seem too happy," her mother observed. Harry also noticed that his friend didn't seem very pleased, though he couldn't possibly fathom why.

"It's not that I'm not happy," Lisa said carefully. Her moody expression was a stark contrast to her words. "I was just hoping I would get to go Christmas shopping with Harry alone."

"Don't you want to meet one of Harry's friends from school, though?" asked Missus Crawft.

"I guess," Lisa replied with slumped shoulders.

"If you want, tomorrow we can go out and do something fun," Harry suggested.

"Something fun?" Lisa blinked at him.

"Yeah...we can see a movie...or go shopping or...something," Harry's words were surprisingly ineloquent for the normally well-spoken boy. Lisa looked at him curious.

"Something fun...just the two of us?"

"Yes."

Lisa took several seconds to respond. When she did it was with a smile that lit the room in a brilliant luminescence that the lights from overhead could never hope to achieve. "I would like that," she said.

XoX

A knock at the door signified the arrival of their guest. Lisa, who was getting in some "Harry time" before she had to share him with one of his school friends, stood up and moved towards the door before anyone else could.

"I'll get it!"

She opened the door and was greeted by two people. A woman who was around her mother's height and had long, wavy brown hair and brown eyes, and a girl who looked almost the woman's spitting image, except her hair was kind of mousy.

"Hello," the woman greeted with a smile. "You must be Harry's friend, Lisa. I'm June and this is my daughter, Hermione."

"Hi!" Hermione said with a bright smile. "I'm really excited to meet you! Harry has told me ever so much about you. I really hope we can get along well."

"Hello..." Lisa eyed the girl around her age warily. She already didn't like this girl. This bushy-haired witch—a surprisingly ironic name since Lisa did not know that Hermione was, in fact, a witch—was stealing her time to be alone with Harry. This girl saw him for nearly nine months out of the year! The least she could do was let Lisa get the other three months and the Christmas holidays!

"Is your mother in?" asked June Granger.

"I am," Lisa's mother walked into the doorway a second later and smiled. "You must be June." Her eyes traveled down to see Hermione and her

smile widened. "And you must be Hermione."

"Yes!" Hermione nodded and smiled at the older woman. "It's very nice to meet you, ma'am!"

"Likewise," Missus Crawft smiled, "Harry has told us a lot about you. He always says that you're one of the smartest girls in class. He's very impressed by your intelligence, which is no easy feat."

As Hermione beamed, Harry walked up to the doorway and greeted his friend with a smile. "Hello, Hermione."

"Harry!"

A squeal split her lips as she launched herself at her friend. Caught within the bushy-haired girl's fierce embrace all Harry could do was return it. She was surprisingly strong.

Seconds later he was being held at arms length and Hermione's lips were traveling several hundred miles per second.

"How are you doing? Has your holiday been good so far? What have you been up to? Oooh~! This is so exciting! It's so nice to finally see you outside of school; we really don't do it often enough!"

"S-slow down, Hermione," Harry nearly stumbled backwards. It had been a long time since the young witch had spoken that fast. Actually, the last time she had spoken with that kind of speed was when she had learned who he was and began chatting about how she had read all about him in a book, the fact that the book was a complete lie notwithstanding. "I can't answer any of your questions if you don't let me talk."

"Oh," Hermione's cheeks turned pink. "Right. Sorry."

"It's fine," Harry waved off her apology. "First, let me introduce you to my best friend." He grabbed Lisa's hand and pulled her to his side.

"Hermione, this is Lisa Crawft. Lisa, this is Hermione Granger, one my friends at school."

Now that the initial moment of wariness had worn off, Lisa was more than

capable of speaking using more than single syllable words.

"It's very nice to meet you," with a smile so wide it split her face in half and forced her eyes to shut, Lisa held her hand out for the other girl to shake. Hermione didn't know why, but that smile really intimidated her for some reason. "It's so nice to meet one Harry's 'friends' from school." The way she said "friends" did nothing to ease the unusual apprehension she felt.

Still, it would be rude not to greet this other girl. She was Harry's friend, after all, so she had to be a good person.

"It's nice to meet you too," Hermione grabbed the other girl's hand, and tried to ignore the pressure put upon it as Lisa squeezed harder than was strictly necessary. "Harry's told me all about you."

"Has he?"

"Oh yes," Hermione nodded and withdrew her hand. "He talks about you very often; about how you're his best friend in the whole world and how he's known you for several years now and he's always writing letters to you and..."

"You're speaking in run on sentences again, Hermione dear," her mother said, halting her conversation with Missus Crawft to address her daughter. "Breath."

"Right," Hermione flushed again. "Sorry."

Missus Granger smiled, then turned back to her conversation with Lisa's mother. "So I can expect Hermione to be back by around three o'clock?"

"Yes," Missus Crawft answered with a nod. "It shouldn't take too long for them to do their shopping. After that I think we'll have lunch, then go see a movie, and then I'll take her home."

"I think that's agreeable," June Granger looked down at her daughter. "Hermione, you be good for Missus Crawft, okay?"

When Hermione nodded her head it was done with such large motions

that she looked almost like those bauble heads you see on the dashboard of cars. "I will."

"Good. Then I will see you later."

XoX

Shopping with Lisa and Hermione was a very awkward affair.

It all started in the car when Harry and Hermione had engaged in a conversation about school. The problem with talking about school, Harry noted, was discussing things like their subjects and what they learned in class without letting the two non-magical folks know about magic. This had put a bit of a damper on any conversation about school.

The second problem was, of course, Lisa.

"Harry and I used to be in the same class every year for five years," the cute brunette with the button nose and doe-like brown eyes glared at Hermione as she said this, as if daring the girl to contradict her.

He wasn't sure what was going on, but ever since Hermione appeared on the scene, Lisa had been very...possessive of him. Even now the grip she had around his right arm was unusually tight. Matters weren't helped any when certain parts of her anatomy came into contact with his arm either. Definitely not.

"Uh..." Hermione looked incredibly unsure of what was going on as well. She seemed to be just as confused as Harry, blinking as she stared at the girl. "Okay..." She looked at Harry, her right eyebrow raised as if to ask "what's up with her?"

Harry could only shrug.

And then there was the shopping itself. In most instances when he and Lisa went shopping together, his friend would hold his hand as they walked. Recently she had gained a preference for lacing their fingers together for some reason—likely because of something she read in a trashy romance novel or some such—but this time she had decided to go for more...drastic measures; namely, wrapping both her arms around his

left and holding it close.

Hermione did not help matters here.

"You two are really close, aren't you?" she asked as they walked along the mall. Some distance behind them was Missus Crawft, who was walking far enough away to give the trio their privacy while still being close at hand. She had been surprisingly quiet during the car ride. Harry had seen her staring at her daughter with an amused smile through the rear-view mirror. He would have wondered about that, but most of his attention had been focused on his disgruntled friend.

"Of course!" Lisa declared, her hold on his arm impossibly tightening, proving that such a thing was indeed possible. "Harry and I have been best friends for years. We share everything together."

For a moment, Harry felt a surge of implacable guilt. Despite her words, he had always kept a secret from her, a big secret; a magical one. In the entire time he had known Lisa never once had he told her about his ability to use magic. And now he was keeping even more secrets from her.

Hermione must have seen this on his face, or maybe she was just curious, because she changed the subject soon after...sort of.

"Hmmm," the bushy-haired witch half smiled at Harry. "You're pretty popular with the ladies, Harry. It seems Daphne has some competition that she didn't even know about."

While Harry tilted his head, the confusion he was feeling blatantly expressed on his face, Lisa's visage darkened slightly.

"Daphne?" her voice was low pitched and threatening. She looked at Harry. "Who's Daphne?"

"Daphne Greengrass," Harry answered, even as he wondered what Lisa was angry about now. "A friend from school. She's in another house—you remember I told you about the school houses?—so we only have a few classes with her. She's a very intelligent girl, almost as smart as Hermione."

"Well, I don't know about almost, but she does have me beat in...fencing."

"Fencing" was what Harry and Hermione had decided to call Defense Against the Dark Arts. Even though fencing at schools had become mostly outdated, there were several private schools that still did it. Hogwarts was a "private boarding school for exceptionally gifted students" as far as the non-magical world was concerned, so Lisa and her mom had accepted it without much need for explanation.

"You're so modest, Hermione."

"Oh hush," Hermione rolled her eyes. "Anyway, Daphne is probably the closest to Harry out of all our friends. Whenever we spend time together as a group, she's always by his side."

"Oh?" Lisa's left eyebrow began twitching. "Is that so?"

"She's also extraordinarily beautiful," Hermione decided to throw oil onto the already raging conflagration. "Looking at her you'd almost think she was some kind of regal princess or something."

"A regal princess, is she?"

Harry looked over at Lisa to see the girl had gained an almost violent vein pulsing on her forehead to go along with her twitching eyebrow. With her teeth grit and her eyes narrowed, she looked the absolute definition of an angry preteen girl.

"Lisa?" Harry began warily. He couldn't remember ever seeing the girl this upset before...and considering he remembered every moment they spent together with absolute perfect clarity that was saying something. "Are you...alright?"

"Oh, I'm fine. Just fine. Don't worry about me. There's nothing wrong here."

The wide, face-splitting smile on Lisa's face did nothing to reassure Harry that his friend was, in fact, fine. Nothing at all.

XoX

Maybe having Hermione come over to spend time and go Christmas shopping with him and Lisa had been a bad idea. Those were the thoughts of one Harry Potter as he stripped off the clothes he had worn today. It had been his hope that he could somehow include his closest and oldest friend in his new life without revealing magic, but it seemed that his plan had been an epic failure, a catastrophe right from the very start; maybe even before it had started.

Opening the second to last drawer Harry pulled out a pair of briefs and put them on, followed by a large black t-shirt that was a few sizes too big.

With a sigh, he closed the drawer and moved over to the bed, where he flopped down on his back without preamble. His body bounced a couple of times as he hit the springs before settling down a moment later. Looking up at the ceiling, Harry pondered his predicament.

It had not even been two years since he entered the wizarding world and already it was looking more and more like he was being pulled away from the world Lisa lived in; the Mundane world. Consequently, this also meant he was being pulled away from Lisa, something he did not want.

Unfortunately, he had no idea how to let the girl he was so fond of remain a part of his life without letting her know about magic, and he couldn't let her know about magic or he would get arrested for breaking the law—Boy-Who-Lived be damned—and Lisa would have her memories erased anyways. Were there any loopholes that allowed non-magical humans to learn about the existence of magic?

Well, there was one that Harry knew of. He could always marry Lisa. As his spouse, it would be perfectly legal for her to learn about the existence of magic. It's not like it would be possible for magic's existence to be kept secret if they were married anyways.

Harry's eyes widened mere seconds after the thought popped into his head. Marry Lisa? Where had that come from? He would admit that he loved Lisa dearly, but it wasn't like, well, it wasn't like *"that."* She was...she was...family! Yes, she was family, like, like a sister...or something. To marry a sister, to marry someone who was as good as family was just...

The door opening yanked Harry from his thoughts and brought his attention back to the present. He sat up and looked to see who had entered. He gulped when he saw that it was Lisa.

She was not wearing anything he had not seen her in before. Nothing unusual certainly, and definitely nothing that could be construed as seductive; just a pair of light pink pajama pants and a loose white t-shirt with pink straps. Yet, for some reason beyond his adolescent comprehension, Harry could not help but think she looked more enchanting than she usually did.

Lisa Crawft was not the most beautiful of girls he knew. She was very pretty, true, and definitely one of the cutest, but he had met numerous girls that could be considered breathtakingly beautiful. Daphne Greengrass was one, as was Selene Gallio de Dracul. Susan Bones had her own charms to her, and so did Tracey Davis and Lisa Turpin, and Perennelle was practically sex on legs. So yes, he had met many girls that could be considered more attractive than his friend. She should not be able to affect him.

So why was his heart beating so fast?

"Lisa," none of his insecurity and uncertainty appeared in his voice. "Is something wrong? I thought you were going to choose a movie for us to watch..." he trailed off as Lisa walked up to him, stopping at the foot of the bed and looking down at him. Her eyes were partially concealed by her hair, but Harry's magically enhanced vision could see them just fine. "Lisa?"

"Do you think I'm pretty?"

"W-what!?" Harry almost choked as the breath he sucked in ended up going down the wrong tube. He recovered quickly, but could not mask his shock. "What brought this about?"

"Just answer the question."

Looking at the girl now, Harry noticed the signs of insecurity; the downcast eyes, the slight fidgeting of her fingers, and the way she worried her lower lip. They were all signs of someone mired in

uncertainty.

"I've always thought you were pretty," Harry decided to go with honesty.

"Really?" Lisa looked at him with a critical eye, as if she didn't quite believe him.

"Of course," Harry frowned, "You know I don't lie, Lisa."

"I know, I know," as she said this the tension seemed to leave her. A smile broke out on her face, one filled with a combination of relief and bashfulness. "Sorry, I was just a little worried."

"Worried?" Harry frowned. "Why?"

"No reason," Lisa looked away for a moment, then looked back at Harry with a large smile. "So, let's go watch that movie. I figured we can choose one together this time."

Harry stood up from the bed and smiled. "So long as it's an action movie and not one of those ridiculous romances you seem to enjoy."

"Oi!" Lisa's cheeks puffed out in mock anger as she crossed her arms over her chest. "Don't diss my romance movies. They're way better than those awful action flicks you love so much."

"Nothing is better than a good action movie."

"Says who?"

"Says me."

The pair left Harry's room, arguing all the while.

XoX

Daphne Greengrass stared at herself in the mirror. The dress she was wearing was quite possibly the most expensive one she had ever worn in her life; a royal purple gown with a single long sleeve that ran all the way down her right arm. The left arm was left completely bare and the dress

had a slight dip that left her collar bone exposed and showed just a hint of her blossoming figure. Covering the upper portion of her body and stopping just above her hips was a translucent white fabric the covered the dress in floral designs. Below that the royal purple shimmered and glittered as it was hit by the light, like a thousand stars twinkling in the sky. A single split in the front of her gown starting a little above the half-way point of her thighs allowed her to, if she so desired, reveal her legs that were toned from years of dance lessons and her just as expensive silver heels with diamond studded clasps.

Her hair was styled for this evening; her shining blond hair was twisted on both sides and connected into a loop that was then pulled up into an elegant bun. Several bangs hung down to frame her face, which, as always, had been left untouched by all makeup except for red lipstick. Hanging from her ears were the earrings that Harry had bought her for Christmas.

As she looked herself over, Daphne had to admit she looked stunning. Her father had really gone all out on her for this years New Year Gala. She hated him all the more for it. She knew why he was doing this, and it made her sick.

"You look so pretty."

Daphne turned around to face her sister. Astoria was wearing an expensive pair of silk pajamas. Daphne had bought them for her last year.

"I wish I looked that pretty," Astoria pouted at her, causing Daphne to smile.

"You're already very beautiful Stori."

"Not as pretty as you are though," Astoria continued pouting, crossing her arms over her chest for good measure. "I mean, look at you. And that dress, it's gorgeous!"

"If you want, for your birthday this year I'll buy you a dress even more beautiful than this one." Doing so would put her back a couple of years as far as her finances were concerned, but Daphne didn't care. The sight

of her sister's smile was worth than any amount of galleons.

"Really!?" When the eldest Greengrass daughter nodded her head, Astoria squealed and launched herself at her sister. "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!"

Daphne laughed as she let her little sister hug her. "Mind the dress, Stori."

"Ah!" Astoria gasped, leaping back as if scalded. "Sorry." An embarrassed blush spread across her milky cheeks.

"It's alright," Daphne smiled gently at her sister, "I just don't want all that effort I put in getting this thing on to go to waste."

A soft crack to the left had her and Astoria turning their heads. Their house elf, who had appeared inside the room, bowed before them. "Mistress Daphne, heir Potter is waiting for you in the entrance hall."

"Inform him that I will be there in just a moment," the house elf bowed deeply before cracking out of existence again. Daphne took a deep breath to steady her nerves. Meanwhile, Astoria was pouting.

"I wish I could go to a ball like this with Harry."

"Believe me, you don't want to go to this ball," Daphne reassured her sister. "It's going to be nothing but pompous fools brown nosing each other in the hopes of gaining favor with other fools. I would much rather stay home."

"But you're going with Harry," Astoria said, as if that single fact made all the difference in the world.

"And I'd much rather simply spend time with Harry away from all that," Daphne sighed. What she wouldn't give to just be able to spend time with Harry outside of a political arena. Maybe some day that would be possible, she thought wistfully.

"I guess," Astoria seemed to realize she would not be winning here and decided to drop the subject. She gave her sister one last hug before

departing. "Knock him dead, sis."

As her sister exited the room, Daphne took several calming breaths and ran through one of the basic techniques Harry had taught her to calm down. When she was ready, she exited the room and walked to the entrance hall.

When she got there, Harry was indeed waiting for her. He was standing off the side, looking at one of the large landscape paintings her father had bought to impress the people who come here. As she walked down the steps, his ears twitched, and he turned to face her.

The way his eyes widened and the redness that stained his cheeks when he saw her was enough to make her heart quicken. She noticed that he too was wearing what looked like exceedingly expensive clothes. The robes he had on were definitely not something you could find just anywhere. He had always been handsome, but in those robes he looked every bit the noble and gallant aristocrat.

"Harry," she greeted as he walked over to her and held out his hand as she reached the last few steps.

"Daphne," he sounded surprisingly breathless. Daphne grabbed his hand and allowed him to guide her down the last set of stairs. When she had reached the bottom, he looked over her over once more, his eyes almost disbelieving. "You look...absolutely stunning."

Daphne felt her own cheeks become tinged with pink as heat rose to her face. It was a struggle not to let her chin drop and her eyes to look demurely at her feet. "Thank you," she murmured.

Taking her hand, Harry gently guided it to the crook of his elbow.

"So," he said, mastering himself quite well. He looked at her with a very slight smile on his face, "Shall we go to the ball?"

Daphne smiled.

XoX

Stepping out of the fire place and into the atrium, Daphne Greengrass took a moment to collect herself. This was to be the first time she would be at one of these balls without her father. That she was going to said ball with Harry and would be in the spotlight because of it just made her all the more nervous. She had never liked dealing with large crowds or being the center of attention.

The roar of the floo had her turning around. Harry stepped out of the bright green flames. He stopped in front of her and smiled.

"Nervous?"

Daphne wondered how Harry knew how she was feeling. Was she really that transparent? She didn't think so. Perhaps he just knew her so well now that he could tell what she was feeling? That was a nice thought, and it caused a familiar warmth to spread through her chest.

"A little," she admitted, taking the proffered arm and beginning to walk along the marble floor. The atrium was not too crowded today. Most Ministry employees were at home with their families. Still, there were a few people here and there, and they all stared at her and Harry as they passed, whispering and pointing. It was annoying, but she did her best to ignore it. "I haven't been to a ball without my father before."

Her father was currently in France where the ICW was holding a meeting of some kind. Daphne didn't know what the meeting was about, only that it was important enough that her father had changed his plans and decided to go there instead of the New Year Gala.

Not that she cared what her father was doing. In truth, she was glad he wasn't with her. It would have ruined her time with Harry.

"And you're worried about what might happen?"

"Yes," Daphne took a moment to collect her thoughts. "Whenever I went to one of these functions with my father, the only thing I ever had to worry about was looking pretty and only speaking when spoken to. I hated being shown off, but at least I didn't have to talk much. Nobody really bothered to speak with me beyond paying sickening compliments."

"I see," Harry paused before speaking again, "and you are worried that you may be forced to speak a bit more now that your father is not there to act as a buffer."

"Sort of," Daphne's arms tightened around his own appendage. "I guess I'm just nervous about saying something and screwing this up. I know how important making these connections will be for you, and I don't want my presence to be a...a hindrance."

Harry nodded his head. He understood where she was coming from, but...

"Daphne, you should know that I'll never see you as a hindrance."

The young girl with blond hair and an icy blue gaze gave him a tender smile.

After the pair checked their wands in at the wand station and left a gaping guard staring after them, the duo made their way to the ballroom. It looked much the same as it had during the last New Year Gala: glittering marble floor and walls, extravagantly decorated Corinthian columns, and a depiction of the night sky overhead. Harry could tell the only difference from this year and last year was the number placed upon the decorations.

"Are you ready?" Harry asked Daphne. The blond-haired girl looked at him before giving a nod of ascent.

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"Right. Then let's go and greet some of the 'esteemed' politicians here."

Daphne almost cracked a grin at Harry's sarcasm.

In short order the two began making their rounds, meeting and greeting many of the other guests. It wasn't that hard, the moment Harry's presence was announced people flocked to them in droves. The popularity of the young boy with raven hair and green eyes seemed to have increased from last year.

Daphne was not surprised by this. Harry had been making waves with many of the political maneuvers he had pulled this year.

It was during this time in which Harry greeted the other guests that Daphne got to see how her friend operated in this political climate. She had to admit, he was very talented for someone who was actually a few months younger than her. While he did not carry himself like a politician, he stood and spoke with a confidence that most people could not mimic. He also seemed to possess a very good memory, for he would greet every person they met by name and ask them very specific questions that went a long way towards endearing them to him. While she did not really care for politics, she knew how they worked, and she could not help but be impressed by how Harry operated.

One thing Daphne noticed that was different about this ball from all the others she had been to was the number of children there. She recognized a good deal of students from Hogwarts, some were even in her year. She wondered what that was about, but was not given time to dwell on it as they were greeted by another powerful figure in the Wizarding Britain.

"And who is this lovely young thing on your arm?"

Daphne nearly twitched as she was called a "lovely young thing" for what had to be the nth time that evening. It had always bothered her how these people kept calling her a "thing" as if she wasn't even a person, but an object meant to be shown off.

"This is Daphne Greengrass," Harry answered the man. The only sign he showed that he was bothered by the much older gentleman's words was the slight tensing of his shoulder. "A good friend of mine from school."

"Oh ho," the older man, an aging wizard with white hair and a handlebar mustache, laughed. "So she is just a friend, then?"

"For now," Harry replied smoothly, "But one never knows what the future may hold, and I would like to create a family one day."

Daphne's heartbeat increased, and she wondered if the blood rushing to her cheeks was visible. Harry wanted a family? She almost shook her

head at the stupidity of that thought. Of course he wanted a family. His family died when he was young. It was only natural that he would want one. Would he want to build a family with her though? The thought was certainly not an unpleasant one.

Ugh, all these thoughts were inappropriate for a twelve year old. Daphne could not help but curse her father for training her to think this way.

"Well, if you ever do decide to start a family, it seems the girl is already quite smitten with you." This time Daphne was sure the blood in her cheeks was visible as she blushed demurely. She leaned in closer to Harry, an almost instinctual reaction from one seeking comfort, eliciting a laugh from the older man. After a few more minutes of Harry conversing with the politician, they excused themselves.

They were given a momentary reprieve from talking as they walked to the next group of people. Harry took this moment to see how Daphne was doing. "Are you alright, Daph?" he asked quietly, leaning in to whisper into her ear. Daphne just barely managed to withhold a shudder as his hot breath washed over her earlobe.

"I am fine," Daphne reassured him. Harry frowned a bit, causing her to smile. "Really, Harry, I am fine. You don't need to worry about me."

"Easier said than done," Harry muttered. Daphne had a feeling he was speaking to himself, but she heard him all the same. His words made her smile widen.

They soon began making their rounds again. Or they would have, if trouble had not come to greet them.

Daphne Greengrass' body stiffened as three people she did not like walked up to them.

"Heir Potter," Lucius Malfoy greeted with a cordial nod that was as false as the words coming from his mouth. "A pleasure to see you again." Not that he wasn't good at faking it. If Daphne did not know the man as well as she did, she would have actually believed he meant those words.

"Lord Malfoy," Harry, it seemed, was just as good at hiding his dislike

behind a mask of pleasant surprise. "Lady Malfoy," he greeted the woman with a nod, earning a stiff one in return. The young boy with raven hair turned to the last member of the group and raised an eyebrow. "Heir Draco, I did not expect to see you here. I trust your holidays have been pleasant?"

"As well as can be expected," Draco said, surprisingly subdued. Daphne concluded that his father had given him a stern talking to about stirring up trouble. Namely that he should not do it.

"You should not be so surprised, Heir Potter," Lucius said with a tight smile. "You did set the precedent, after all. After seeing you at the ball last year, many of us thought it would be a good idea to have our own children accompany us. It seems you are quite the trend setter."

"Thank you."

As Harry responded to Lucius' words with a nod of thanks, Daphne noticed they were beginning to draw a crowd. A lot of people were surrounding them. It made her feel nervous, but she kept her nerves steady by reminding herself that she was with Harry and none of these people would dare try anything with him there.

"I believe you already know each other, but please allow me to introduce my date for the night, Heiress to the Noble House of Greengrass, Daphne Greengrass."

"A pleasure," Lucius Malfoy gave Daphne a charming smile that made her almost shudder in revulsion. It was a pleasant smile, to be sure, but there was something about it that made her feel violated. She promised herself that after tonight she would take a long, hot shower to get rid of the feeling of oil saturating her body.

"I wished to convey my respect and admiration to you as well," Lucius continued, "I read that article about your life, and I must say, I am impressed with how well you have adjusted to our world in so short a time. Living with muggles." He shook his head sadly. "It must have been difficult."

Daphne felt her senses go on alert at the blond-haired man's words.

While not the politician her father was, she had been trained to know a trap when she saw one. And she could see this one clear as day. The question was: what angle was Lucius going for? And did Harry know about it?

"It was difficult," Harry admitted reluctantly. "My relatives had a hard time understanding me, and didn't really know how to react whenever accidental magic happened around me."

"I can imagine," Lucius actually managed to sound sympathetic. An impressive feat, to be sure. "But you seem to have come out of the ordeal quite well-adjusted." The man paused, then smiled. Daphne did not like that smile. Neither did Harry, if the way he stiffened was anything to go by. "I was even more impressed by how ruthless you were when dealing with the people who wrote those books about you."

Daphne wondered where Lucius was going with this. She knew what he was talking about. The publishing house that had created all of those Harry Potter stories had been sued for a very hefty fine. They'd lost so much money that the company was simply struggling to stay afloat. Not to mention their reputation was shot.

What was Lucius playing at? Why bring that up?

"You're too kind, Lord Malfoy," Harry said. "I only did what anyone who's name was used not only without his knowledge but also without his consent."

"Indeed."

Lucius smiled. Daphne knew in that moment that the trap was about to fall.

"If I am not mistaken, the barrister who aided you in your retribution was Andromeda Tonks, correct?" Daphne's eyes could not be kept from widening in shock. She had finally realized where the loathsome man was going with this. Harry had as well, judging by the slight tightening of his jaw. "I was most surprised that you were willing to use such a...dubious individual for a job like this, but I must admit she did an...admirable enough job, I suppose."

A discreet glance around the room revealed all the people who had been drawn to this small confrontation whispering to themselves now. Daphne could not make out their words, but she doubted any of them were good.

Andromeda Tonks was a well-known figure in the Wizarding World. But she wasn't well-known for altruistic reasons. Andromeda was a blood-traitor, disowned from the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black for running off and marrying a muggleborn. It didn't matter that she was one of the most successful barristers in the muggle and magical worlds. In the eyes of the nobility, she was a blood-traitor of the worst kind and not someone to be openly associated with.

And Lucius Malfoy had just dropped the bomb that Harry apparently had business dealings with her.

This was bad. Very bad.

Daphne managed to keep her cold facade in place. Beside her, Harry also managed to keep his mask up, for the most part. She did see his eyes dart around at all the people surrounding them. She wondered if the disapproving stares were getting to him as much as they were her.

What was Harry going to do now? There was no way to get out of this situation that she could see. Even if Lucius was lying, something Daphne knew he was capable of but did not believe was the case here, rumors about this meeting would spread. By the end of the night, Harry will have lost a good deal of support regardless of what he said here. All he could do now was run damage control.

She watched Harry out of the corner of her eye. He looked uncertain. Most would miss the signs, but Daphne knew him well enough to see the flicker of emotion in his eyes and could tell what they meant.

A moment later his eyes sharpened as he stared back at Lucius. His back noticeably straightened as he gazed at the older man with a steely expression.

"It is true that I hired Barrister Tonks for her services." The murmurs increased. Daphne's own eyes widened incredulously as Harry just admitted to hiring the most infamous blood-traitor in Magical Britain.

There wasn't much else he could do, true, but still...to admit something like that was, and in such a public setting! It was... "She came highly recommended."

Daphne glanced around the large crowd of people warily. She could see them whispering to each other as pointed at Harry. Many had disapproving looks on their faces.

She looked back at Harry to see the young boy her age staring at Lucius Malfoy with his head held high an expression that looked like it had been carved from stone on his face. She wondered: what was he thinking?

"Did she really?" Lucius was smiling, but it wasn't a pleasant smile. He knew that Harry had just lost a good deal of support from the nobles listening in on their conversation. Daphne felt her disgust and hatred for the man grow. "I am surprised anyone would recommend her, except maybe those less...fortunate than people of our standing." Daphne knew that "our standing" really meant the lords and heirs of noble houses, and those who were "less fortunate" were half-bloods and muggleborns, or first generations, as Harry liked to call them.

Another glance at the raven-haired boy revealed that her date for the night was losing ground. It would not be obvious to those who did not know him—Harry was frighteningly adept at hiding his true thoughts behind a mask of emotionlessness—but Daphne noticed the signs: the way his right hand twitched, the thin line his lips had become, the minute flickering of his eyes as he glanced around the room. He knew as well as she did that there was very little he could do or say to get out of the trap Lucius Malfoy had led him into.

It was very fortunate then, that there were a few people within that ballroom who were loyal to Harry and willing to stand up for him.

"I must agree with young Heir Potter here."

All heads turned as Celestina Zabini walked—no, not walked, more liked stalked—towards them, her gait like that of a predator in the midst of catching its prey. Beside her were her two children, Blaize and Celia. The small group of three stopped on Harry's right. Blaize gave his friend a glance, a small smirk plastered on his face, then returned his attention to

what was unfolding before them.

Celestina had a beautiful, terrifying smile on her gorgeous red lips as she looked at Lucius Malfoy, who did not look at all pleased to see the woman here.

"Madame Zabini..." Lucius looked like he had swallowed a snot flavored Bertie Botts Every Flavored bean. "How nice to see you this evening."

The smile grew.

"You're too kind. As I was saying, I must agree with Heir Potter; Andromeda Tonks does admirable work. I myself have used her on a number of occasions." There were no murmurs this time. Everyone was staring at the scene in complete silence, waiting on baited breath.

"Do you really?" Lucius appeared to be struggling to keep up his mask of civility. It was clear to Daphne that he did not appreciate Blaise's mother interfering with his attempt at bringing down Harry's popularity, especially when he had been doing just that so successfully. "I am surprised someone of your status would use someone with such debatable standing among our kind."

"Oh, let us not beat around the bush, Lucius," Celestina's eyes glimmered with mirth. "What you really mean to say is that you don't think a noble should use someone who was considered a blood-traitor after her mother kicked her out of the family for marrying a muggleborn." The grip on Lucius' cane tightened. Celestina turned to look at Narcissa, who stiffened considerably under the predatory gaze of the beautiful Italian woman. "And speaking of, just how is your mother doing? I have not heard from her in a while..."

"You..."

"Oh dear, that's right," Celestina's eyes widened in mock-surprise. "Didn't she die some time ago after going insane? Dear me, I seem to have forgotten. Of course, it was rumored that Walburga Black was always unstable..."

"How dare you!" Lucius Malfoy hissed, finally losing his composure.

"Walburga Black died from the grief of watching her children and nieces become a bunch of blood traitors!"

"Are you talking about your dear sister, Bellatrix?" Celestina quickly fired off another salvo of the Blacks dirty laundry. The name caused Lucius and Narcissa to glare at her while everyone else stiffened in fear. That was not a name one uttered lightly. "I suppose if I had a daughter who joined He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, I would go insane as well."

Daphne almost smirked as she watched the Malfoy family struggle to keep their composure. It was amusing to watch the trio as their faces fought to keep from scowling. Fortunately for Lucius Malfoy, he and his wife were experienced politicians and well versed in keeping their composure in any and all matters. Unfortunately for the man and his wife, Draco Malfoy was not.

"How dare you insult my aunt, you whore!" Draco Malfoy exploded, his face red with anger. "My aunt was a noble woman fighting for a noble cause! Ridding the world of filthy mudbloods and blood-traitors! I won't have you insulting her like that!"

"Draco!" Lucius barked too late, the damage had already been done. "Be silent!"

Draco looked shocked. "But father—"

"Silence!"

Rather than look insulted by Draco's insult, the beautiful woman with succubus eyes simply looked amused. "Quite the mouth your son has. He seems to have some very deep seated beliefs about those who do not come from magical families. Does he speak for both of you in this matter?"

"I can assure you he does not," Lucius lied through his teeth. Daphne could see it quite clearly, and she was sure many of the other nobles could as well.

And Lucius seemed to realize this. His eyes darted around at the crowd. Many of the eyes that had once been staring disapprovingly at Harry

were now looking at him and his family with unease. While a good few of the nobles there did not like those they considered "beneath them," they would never expression such opinions so brazenly, nor did they believe all muggleborns should die like those who were in league with You-Know-Who.

Daphne could not quite hide her smirk. Lucius might not have lost this round, but thanks to Celestina, he would have to settle for a tie.

XoX

"Thank you for your intervention, m'lady Zabi..." Harry quickly noticed the dangerous look she was giving him and paused, "...I mean, Celestina."

"You're most welcome," the smile returned. Harry felt a mild shudder coarse down his spine and then go back up. "I have never really approved of the Malfoy's or their ideals." Her smiled widened. Harry wondered why he felt this inexplicable urge to run away. "And I rather like you."

"Ah...um...thank you," Harry shifted uncomfortably. He did not know why, but that smile of hers absolutely terrified him beyond all comprehensible believe. It was as if there was some kind of monster lurking behind that smile, a eldritch horror of unfathomable depths the likes of which human minds were never meant to comprehend.

"Harry," Celia greeted him with a smile that made him want to hide in a closet...and made Daphne want to hex her. "You look incredibly...delicious, this evening."

"Ah!" Harry couldn't quite contain his squeak. "Ah...t-thank you. You look incredibly...lovely as well."

"You're too kind," the older, rather beautiful girl purred seductively. Daphne fought the urge to scowl, though she still ended up glaring at the daughter of Celestina Zabini.

"Now, now, Celia dear," Celestina placed a hand on her daughters shoulder, her expression amused. "There can be no hitting up young Heir Potter tonight. He already has a date."

"Oh yes," Celia's eyes hardened as they landed on Daphne. "Heiress Greengrass. It's a pleasure to see you again. I am surprised your father let you come here on your own."

Now that she was finally being directly spoken to, Daphne had no trouble speaking her mind. "Father is thinking about creating an alliance with the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter. It's only natural that he would entrust his eldest daughter to Harry."

From the way Celia's eyes narrowed, it was clear the older girl understood the significance of Daphne calling Harry by his first name. While she did it because she simply dismissed pure-blood etiquette like her mother, Daphne was doing it because of how close she was to Harry.

A moment later, Celia's smile was back in place. "I suppose it would only be natural that your father would want to create an alliance with the young man who defeated the Dark Lord. What better way to ensure his asset is well protected...and to ride on the coattails of Harry's fame, of course."

Daphne twitched on Harry's arm. The act, while not much to some, was enough to startle Harry. He had never seen Daphne lose her composure like this before, not in front of a large crowd of people at any rate.

"Isn't that why you're trying to hit up a man several years younger than you?" asked Daphne, her voice smooth even as a storm built up behind her eyes. "Because you want a piece of his fame? Or maybe you wish to take the Potter wealth for yourself?"

"Just what are you implying?" asked Celia, her eyes hardening into diamonds.

"Oh, nothing. Nothing at all."

It was not long before the two girls were staring each other down. It would have been almost amusing to see at any other time, from any other two people. On Daphne and Celia, those glares caused several people, and the young man they were fighting over in particular, to feel inexplicably nervous.

And were those sparks coming out of their eyes?

Harry turned his head to look at Blaise. "Help me," he mouthed to the dark-skinned boy.

Blaise merely smirked, and shook his head. "Sorry, Potter, you're on your own."

Harry glared at the other boy. "Some friend you are. What kind of friend leaves him with..." he eyed the two girls who were still bickering—they were so busy arguing and glaring at each other they didn't even notice he and Blaise were talking about them—then looked back at Blaise. "...This?"

"The best kind."

"I do so love how you two are getting along," Celestina's smile was a bit more honest...and a bit less petrifying. "You don't know how pleased it makes me to know that you two are friends."

Blaise and Harry looked at each other, then shrugged.

While the two boys went from playful bantering to sharing their holiday experiences, two more people appeared before them.

"Lady Zabini," Madame Bones greeted cordially, if warily.

"Amelia," Celestina actually appeared mildly pleased to see the stern looking woman. She then looked down at the red head in the Department heads company. "And young Susan too. It seems we all had the same idea to bring our children with us this year."

"I was intrigued when Mister Potter showed up last year and decided to bring my niece along," Amelia Bones admitted with a shrug.

"He did set the precedence, didn't he?" Celestina commented, her eyes traveling the Harry as he greeted Susan Bones with a smile. "He's quite the trend setter," she finished, unknowingly repeating Lucius Malfoy's words from a few minutes ago.

"Indeed."

XoX

Susan Bones was not the only young Hogwarts student the others had met at the New Year Gala either. Not even several minutes after the red-haired witch had shown up did Neville and his grandmother appear before them.

The joy at seeing another one of his friends was only slightly diminished by the tension that rapidly grew between Celestina and the Dowager Longbottom. Harry did not know what had happened between the two to cause such tension, but it was readily apparent to everyone that they did not like each other.

After conversing and mingling with his friends while picking at some of the finger food, Harry had decided it was time to join some of the older couples on the dance floor.

Several seconds later, Harry and Daphne found their own secluded little spot on the dance floor. The young raven-haired boy with emerald eyes had his right hand on Daphne's waist, the other was tenderly holding her left hand. In return, the blond beauty had placed her own right hand on the area between his neck and shoulder.

The two did not know how long they had been dancing, lost as they were in each others eyes. They had not looked away from the other since the moment they'd begun. Which would explain why they missed the many looks they had drawn. Even Harry, observant as he was, had not seen them. In that moment, he only had eyes for Daphne.

Of course, all good things must come to an end, if only to make room for more good things.

"E-excuse me."

Daphne and Harry stopped dancing to look at Susan. The young red head was standing next to them, a slight tint of pink on her cheeks as she twiddled her thumbs.

"I hope you don't mind," she muttered slightly, "But I was hoping...I was just wondering if I could have a dance...with Harry."

"Daphne?" While technically speaking the choice of dancing with Susan was his, he felt Daphne, as his date, deserved to make the choice.

"Of course you can dance with Harry," Daphne said. A moment later she smiled. It was a surprisingly sly smile, for Daphne, that is. "Just remember that I get the last dance."

"Of course," Susan smiled, even as her cheeks turned a brighter shade of red.

After giving Harry one last affectionate smile, Daphne excused herself and made her way to the food tables, where Blaise and Neville were quietly conversing with a few of the other students from Hogwarts who had been brought to the Gala by their parents.

Soon, Harry and Susan were dancing, much the same way Harry had danced with Daphne. The difference was noticeable to those who knew the nuances of dancing, however. Where before the dance was a dance between equals, now it was clear that while Harry was leading, Susan was the better dancer. Which would make sense considering she had taken dance lessons for many, many years; she had been dancing for even longer than Daphne.

"Have you had a good Christmas so far?" Harry asked as they moved across their small space on the dance floor. The moves were not that complicated, and for someone with the natural grace of a predator like Harry—or experience like Susan—it was easy to talk and dance at the same time.

"Yes," Susan smiled at Harry. "I had a very good Christmas. I especially liked the gift you gave me." For Christmas this year, Harry had bought Susan a human sized badger in the Hufflepuff house colors. Of course, it was not just a human-sized badger; it had been enchanted to move and act like a loving house pet whenever the keyword was said in it's presence.

The keyword was "Hufflepuff," naturally.

"I'm glad you like it."

"Mmmhmm, I like it very much," Susan looked at her friend inquiringly. "Did you like the gift I gave you?"

"Of course," Harry answered, "I had actually been looking into getting a set of new gloves for a while now, but I wasn't sure what to get. The ones you bought me were much better than the ones I was looking at."

"They're charmed too," Susan seemed to almost sag in relief at the knowledge that Harry appreciated her gift. "They were enchanted with a durability charm, instant reparo charm, and a scourgify charm."

"I noticed." Harry's smile caused Susan's heart to leap in her throat and all the blood in her body to rush to her head. "Thank you."

"Ah...ah...you're welcome," Susan mumbled, looking down at the shining marble floor.

XoX

The floo roared with brilliant green fire as Daphne and Harry stepped out of the fireplace and into the entrance hall of Greengrass manner. Both youngsters were smiling. They knew their time together was coming to an end, but both were still in high spirits.

"I think I had more fun at this years gala than I have every other one I've been too."

"Hmmm..." Harry looked down at the blond girl speculatively.

"Considering this is only the second one I've ever been to, I don't think I can truly give an opinion." Barely a second had passed before Harry gave her a genuine, honest smile. "But I did have a really good time."

Daphne turned to fully face Harry. Her hands reached for his, clasping them both. The large smile that curved her lips was a truly beautiful thing to see. It was one of the few times he had ever seen such a "full" smile on her face.

"Thank you, Harry."

Harry knew Daphne was not thanking him for tonight. Unbidden, his eyes softened.

"You don't need to thank me," he murmured softly.

Daphne shook her head. She disagreed; Harry had no idea how much he had helped her. She wouldn't argue with him though. He was a very stubborn person, and arguing would not make him change his mind.

"I thank you regardless. I...you don't know how much it meant to me...what you did, I mean." Daphne's cheeks became suffused with warmth as she tried to express what she was feeling with words. It was difficult. For a girl who had spent most of her life behind a mask of ice, telling someone what she was feeling was a near impossibility. "I...you really helped me."

Harry stared at her for a moment, a long moment. Daphne actually became mildly uncomfortable by the prolonged silence, but she tried to keep herself still.

Finally, he sighed, then smiled. "You're welcome then." It seemed he had decided not to argue the point either. "I'm glad I could help."

Within the entrance hall, two large smiles lit up the austere manor.

XoX

Upon entering her room, Daphne Greengrass was met with a surprise. Well, not really a surprise. She had expected it, after all, but it was still a bit unusual.

Astoria Greengrass was curled up on her bed, her head lying on the mattress and poking out from underneath the covers. Daphne could not make out much of her sister's face, just the golden blond hair that spread across the pillow like a halo. A soft smile appeared on her face.

Stepping into her closet Daphne slowly, quietly, undressed. She then changed into a pair of expensive green silk pajamas and entered her room again.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, Daphne slowly stroked her sleeping sister's hair. With a stifled moan, Astoria's eyes fluttered open. Upon her eyes meeting the icy blues of Daphne, she smiled.

"Hey, Daph," she whispered, her voice groggy.

"Stori," Daphne kept the smile few would ever see on her face, "It's been a while since I've caught you in my bed."

"I wanted to greet you when you got back," the younger girl admitted shamelessly. Daphne's smile widened even as it retained its tenderness. "How was the ball?"

"Much better than last year."

"I'll bet," Astoria's smile, even in its tiredness, was very mischievous. Daphne knew what the girl was thinking, and couldn't quite dispute her unvoiced thoughts and beliefs, nor did she try. There wasn't much point, especially when she was at least partially correct in her assumptions.

"Hey, Daphne."

"Yes?"

"Do you mind if I sleep with you tonight?"

Daphne tilted her head slightly. It had been a while since her sister had actually slept with her. Back when they were younger, she used to do it all the time, but that had changed in the past few years. Partly because they were growing up, but mostly because her father did not approve.

Well, their father wasn't there now, was he?

"Sure."

Astoria carefully scooted over so that Daphne could crawl under the covers. When the beautiful blond got comfortable, lying on her side, the younger of the two scooted against her sister until they were spooning. A pair of delicate arms wrapped around the smaller girl's frame, the embrace both loving and protective. Astoria slowly smiled, and she knew

her sister was smiling as well.

The two fell asleep just like that, one content to be in the arms of the person who had taken care of her since she was little and the other dreaming a certain young boy with messy raven hair and emerald eyes.

Before I end this chapter I would like to just say a few first.

First, I want to thank everyone who reads my fanfictions. Very few things give me greater joy than knowing you like reading my stories.

Second, I would like to thank everyone who plans on going onto Amazon and ordering a copy of "A Fox's Love." There are absolutely no words in the existence of man that can describe how grateful I am for your support.

And finally, I would like to mention the SOPA. Apparently it's back again. If you want to sign the petition to stop Obama and the government from trying to make fanfics illegal in America, please go onto google, type SOPA petition and sign it.

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter.

Loss

Chapter 21: Loss

Harry Potter sat down in the compartment he had grabbed for himself and his friends with a heavy sigh. While he was disappointed to be leaving Lisa behind again, a part of him was very glad the winter holidays had finally come to an end. So much had happened during the two week break this time, and not all of it good, that he really just wanted to put it all behind him, which was very hard for someone with his unique talent to do.

Sometimes, having eidetic memory was such a pain.

As he carefully floated his trunk into the storage compartment overhead, Harry reached into the magically expanded pocket in his pants and pulled out a rolled up newspaper. He unrolled it and stared at the front page headline, which contained a large image of a beautiful ballroom with himself, Daphne, the Malfoy's, and the Celestina Zabini standing in the center. The title read "The making of strong new alliances? Or a political scandal?"

The article was a very skewed and biased opinion piece detailing the events that had taken place during the New Year Gala. A good deal of the facts within it were not only way off base, but completely contradictory to each other. It almost felt like six or seven different people had a hand in writing it, couldn't agree on what to write, and just decided to combine all their thoughts into one large jumbled mess of biased opinions.

Harry suspected this was due to both Lucius and Celestina using their wealth to try and turn the article in their favor so they came out of this no-win situation in the best light possible, both for their own reasons, of course.

Harry had already read through it and memorized the entire thing, naturally, but he still kept the newspaper as a memento of his own inexperience.

There were many people throughout history who had been like him; confident people who believed they could change the world. These people, many of them starting out with wisdom and benevolence, often grew arrogant and became egoistical. This egotism caused them to make mistakes, their arrogance made them reckless, and in the end they ended up losing everything when they could have had it all if they had just acted with more prudence.

Harry had vowed long ago to never make those mistakes, but it appeared that putting these lessons into practice was much harder than it looked. That was why he was truly grateful to Celestina Zabini for her interference that night. His fame combined with his intelligence and ambition had made him arrogant, and that arrogance had cost him dearly. Even with Celestina's timely interventions, his reputation had taken a serious blow and people were now questioning his competence and ability as the Head of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter.

He had believed that he was ready to face the big leagues, to stand on equal footing with people like Lucius Malfoy, who had decades more experience in the political arena than he did. He had stepped into a field where his only advantages had been his fame, his anonymity, and Andromeda's coaching. It had served him well during his first New Year Gala last year, and he had believed it would be enough for this one as well.

Sometimes life liked to slap people in the face. It had certainly dealt him a heavy blow.

One of the many things that Harry had not thought over thoroughly enough was that the moment he entered the political arena, the advantage of being a pseudo-legendary figure that everyone knew of but no one truly knew was lost. People now knew him, not just of him, but knew him, the individual behind the myth of The-Boy-Who-Lived. He was no longer anonymous, and for someone like Lucius Malfoy, just knowing him was enough to dig up plenty of dirt with which he could use to slander Harry's name and cause his support to drop.

Really, what had he been thinking? Going up against Lucius Malfoy without an experienced politician backing him up. How reckless was that?

After that night, Harry had vowed not to let his arrogance get the better of him ever again. If he wanted his ambitions to become a reality, then he needed to be at the top of his game.

"Harry!"

Hearing his name being called and the door sliding open, Harry had just enough time to stand up and catch the bushy-haired missile that shot at him like a speeding bullet.

"Hermione!" Harry grinned down at his sort of self-proclaimed rival in school, thoughts on Lucius and politics put on the back burner. "You're here early. Normally, you and Tracey are the last people to show up."

"I woke up really early this morning and kept pestering my parents," Hermione admitted with a bit of a sheepish smile. "I think they got annoyed by how much I was...talking, and decided to drive me to King's Cross earlier than they normally do."

"You do tend to talk a lot."

"That's a mean thing to say to a friend."

Harry chuckled. "Sorry." He offered the girl a smile, which she returned with one of her own. The young boy with raven hair then looked around the compartment. "Since you're here now, I can only assume the others will be arriving soon. I guess that means I should expand this place a bit."

He pulled out his wand and was about to cast the expansion charm when Hermione grabbed his wrist. When he looked at her curiously, she said, "Would you mind if I try expanding the room? I've been practicing the wand movements and incantation, but I haven't actually had a chance to see if I could use it."

"Huh? Sure, I don't see a problem with that. Let's see what you can do."

"Thank you."

Hermione pulled out her wand and soon began making the necessary wand motions for the expansion charm. Like always, her movements

were very precise and calculated. They were completely different from Harry's own wand motions, which he used with much less precision since he didn't actually need them and only used them because they helped focus his magic. The results were still the same however, and in less than a minute the room had been expanded to a reasonable size, though Hermione looked exhausted after doing so.

"Ugh..." the girl breathed heavily as she slumped down in her seat, a mild amount of sweat forming on her brow. She wiped at the sweat with her hand, and then leaned her head against the seat. "I don't know how you can expand the compartments every time we're on the Hogwarts Express. That was exhausting."

"The Expansion Charm is an above NEWT level charm due to the magical requirements," Harry rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Small items such as a pocket or a book-bag don't drain you too much, but on anything larger it can be very taxing on your reserves. Expanding this compartment is normally something only an adult with an above average magical index can do."

He looked at Hermione, who was focused intently on him. Her fingers twitched, and Harry had the feeling it was only because she didn't want to miss something he said that she hadn't brought out something to take notes on.

"I suspect the reason you can do the expansion charm despite being so tired afterward is due to how precise your wand movements and incantations are. They help you focus your magic well enough that you don't waste any of it when you use a spell." Harry frowned. "That might actually be something we could experiment with later. Determining how efficient different people are at using their magic and how wand movements and incantations help. We could probably write a book on it."

Thinking about it, writing a book might actually be a good idea. He had not found any books on the subject of how wand movements and incantations help focus a witch or wizards magic to produce better and more consistent results. The only mention of it was in the more advanced transfiguration books and some of the arithmancy books.

Hermione beamed at the thought. "I've always wanted to write my own book."

As he and Hermione began discussing potential ways to figure out how much magic one person used over another due to their use of wand movements and incantations, their friends began arriving in small groups. Before too long the compartment was filled and soon enough they were off to Hogwarts.

XoX

"Alright, you lot! Quiet down now!"

An amused Harry sat next to an equally amused Katie within the Gryffindor team's locker room. And while they were sitting down wearing identical expressions of merriment, Oliver once more paced back and forth in front of the Gryffindor Quidditch team.

As per the usual the team was dressed in their red and gold Quidditch robes while the ever insane captain of their team gave his spiel. Unsurprisingly it was the exact same spiel he gave every time they were about to play in a match.

While Harry and Katie sat together, a little off to the side were the twins, Fred and George. They were leaning against one of the lockers, their arms crossed and matching grins on their faces. Knowing them as he did, Harry knew they were just waiting for an opportunity to interrupt their ever serious and not-quite-right-in-the-head captain.

Sitting on Katie's opposite side were the other two other Chasers, Alicia and Angelina. Both looked as beautiful as they always did, which Harry was beginning to appreciate more and more as the days went by and he got more comfortable in his own skin, as it were. He actually kind of wished he could see what they looked like underneath those robes.

Yes, his hormones were still acting up. According to Emily Smith his body was likely going to remain overcharged with hormones until his puberty ended. Just when that was neither of them could say. He was an unusual case, according to her.

It was just as well. The thoughts didn't bother him as they once did, and he was now in perfect control of his faculties and ability to think without letting any lustful urges and desires get in the way. He was now more than capable of admiring a good-looking female without feeling dirty, shameful or embarrassed.

"This is the last match of the season," Oliver was continuing to say as he paced back and forth, locking eyes with each member of his team. "We're not facing Slytherin this time, but Ravenclaw."

"We have Harry to thank for that," George opined from where he stood.

"Huzzah for Harry!" Fred cheered with an equal amount of zeal.

What they were saying was indeed true. Now that all the teams used the same broom, the game was no longer a matter of who had better equipment, but who had more skill. Slytherin was not as talented as they would have liked to believe. Of the team, only Titus Button had any real talent for the sport. Harry determined that if he ever became captain, the Slytherin team would likely make a serious comeback in the future.

"Quiet you two! We need to stay focused!" Oliver snapped. "Our victory against Ravenclaw won't come easy. They've got a great line up this year, especially their Seeker." Ravenclaw's Seeker was Cho Chang, a pretty third year of Asian descent. She was also quite talented on a broom. "We have to be at the top of our game if we want to win!"

"Ah, don't worry so much, Ollie," Fred told him with a joviality that made the older student twitch, "We might have a bit more trouble than usual, but we've got this victory in the bag. Don't forget, we've got Harry."

"Your vote of confidence is most reassuring," Harry rolled his eyes just a bit. "But don't forget that there is more to a team than just a Seeker. And Cho Chang's going to be a tough opponent, even for me."

Through watching her other matches he had determined that Cho Chang's skills on a broom were almost on par with his own. Really, his only two advantages were his incredible situational awareness, and the lightning quick reflexes he had gained from his many years of studying martial arts.

But that was alright. This was exactly what he wanted. To beat an opponent who could truly test him, someone that could push him to new heights. Competing against someone on even grounds and proving himself superior was what truly mattered in situations like this. A half-assed victory over an opponent was not a true victory, and when he beat Cho Chang it wouldn't be because he had better equipment or was more prepared, but because he was simply better on a broom.

"And there goes Harry, getting that strange look on his face again."

"Excuse me?" Harry looked over at Katie, who was staring at him with a look that somewhere between amused and disturbed.

"That look," she said, gesturing to him, "Whenever you get really competitive about something you get this look on your face that just screams freaky. It's not as scary as Oliver's fanatical expressions—"

"Oi!"

"—But it's still pretty creepy," she concluded.

For several seconds, Harry said nothing. During this moment of silence he looked at all of the other people in the room, judging the truth from their expressions. He then looked back at Katie, his expression only slightly perturbed. "Do I really?"

"You really do," Katie answered, causing the others—even Oliver—to nod along with her.

"Oh." Well now he was feeling more than just a little embarrassed. He didn't know his competitive streak caused him to gain a facial expression of any kind that made people actually think he looked creepy.

"Don't worry about it too much, old chum!" Fred walked up and slung an arm around Harry's shoulder.

George soon followed suit. "We accept you, crazy and all!"

Harry could only look at the twins on either side of him with a deadpan stare. "Gee, thanks."

XoX

Harry's eyes narrowed as he glared through the lenses of his protective goggles. The air around him whistled by, buffeting his hair wildly. With his hands gripping the handle of his broom, the young man that had emerald eyes laced with steel performed a variety of acrobatic maneuvers that would have turned most people's stomach.

All around him other people were flying as well. Angelina, Alicia, and Katie were flying in a tight arrow formation behind him while he continued his erratic areal performance to deter any of the other players from making a pass at them. And while he kept everyone away, teammates were using his wild maneuvering as a smokescreen for their play.

Twisting his broom around, he made a gut-wrenching corkscrew that pushed him down on his broom. He then took off faster than a bullet from a gun, traveling through the space between two of the Chasers on the opposing team and disrupting their play. Another stomach-turning maneuver brought him within range of the last Chaser, who was so startled when Harry appeared in front of him that he nearly fell off his broom despite them being nearly a meter apart. With his task done and the Quaffle now in the hands of his team, he flew back into formation.

"Katie passes to Angelina, who is looking mighty fine today if I do say so myself. Angelina passes to Ali—no, wait! It's a feint! Angelina feints a pass to Alicia—Roger Davies takes the bait!—and passes it back to Katie! Stretton tries to block, but is blocked in turn by Harry! Katie moves in for the throw, she shoots, and it's good! The score is now 110:70, Gryffindor!"

Lee Jordan's voice faded into the background for a moment as a loud cheer went up in the stands. Harry stopped his areal maneuvering and leveled out before looking at all of the people cheering them on. With his predator enhanced vision he was able to pick out his friends among the crowd. They were sitting together in the Gryffindor stand as a show of support, holding a large sign that changed from "Go Harry!" to "Win!" every one and a half minutes.

There were a good deal more people in the stands than usual. After

traveling far above the field, Harry could see a number of people who did not go to Hogwarts sitting in the teacher's stand. A few of those people he recognized from having seen pictures of them in the Quidditch section of the Daily Prophet. They were prominent figures in Wizarding sports. At least two of them were owners of a Quidditch team.

Were they coming there to recruit potential players to their team? Well, obviously, if they were taking the time out of their busy schedules to watch a school game then it was because they were in the market for new talent. He had noticed from the moment the game started that more than a few of those watching had zeroed in on him. Did that mean they were hoping to recruit him, or at least offer him a possible place on their team when he graduated from Hogwarts?

Absently rotating his broom along an axis, Harry dodged a bludger that sailed passed his head close enough to ruffle his hair. He made several quick observations of the Quidditch pitch to determine where all of the other players were in relation to him. Katie and the other two members of the Flying Foxes were pestering the Ravenclaw Chasers and doing what they could to keep the other team from being able to even pass much less score a goal.

A look to his left revealed Fred and George having at it with one of the bludgers, harassing Cho Chang and keeping her from trying to find the snitch while Harry continued helping wrack up points for Gryffindor with the three Chaser girls.

Deciding to get back into the game, Harry dove down towards where the Chasers were playing a game of cat and mouse.

"Katie has the ball. Passes it to Angelina who throws it to Alicia. Back to Angelina. Davies tries to intercept, but is blocked by Potter! Angelina catches the ball and shoots—no! It's another feint! She passes the ball to Alicia who shoots and its good! Another goal for Gryffindor!"

Harry smiled to himself as the score became 130:80 in Gryffindors favor. The plan they had come up with to beat Ravenclaw was simple in theory. The twins would keep Cho Chang busy dodging bludgers while making sure Ravenclaw's own Beaters couldn't do anything. Meanwhile, he and

the three Chasers would simply wrack up as many points as possible before the snitch showed itself.

And speaking of the snitch, Harry caught a very quick flash of gold near the teachers stands. It was only a short glimpse, but he recognized the snitch as it flew behind the stand and hid on the other side.

Wanting to end the game quickly now that he had seen his objective, Harry bolted towards the teachers stand with very little in the way of warning. He blazed past Cho and the Weasley twins, startling all three of them as he flew straight towards his target.

"And Potter's off! Does this mean he's seen the snitch!?"

Keeping his body low so as to become more streamlined in order to cut through wind resistance, Harry flew forward. He curved around the teachers stand, hugging the corner tightly as he made the near ninety-degree turn. When he got behind the stand he saw it. There, just several feet in front of him, was the snitch.

As the golden winged ball darted off upon it spotting him, Harry took off after it. They moved back into the stadium proper, where everyone could now see that he was indeed chasing after the snitch.

"And it is! Harry Potter has seen the snitch and is on its tail like a gnome on a garden! And there goes Cho Chang, who has managed to break away from the Weasley twins bludger harassment!"

The chase that followed was one Harry had done many times now. The snitch seemed to have a reasonable degree of intelligence for a non-sentient object that had been animated by magic. Whenever he tried to get in close, it would twist and turn every which way in an attempt to throw him off its trail. And it worked too. Despite his talents on a broom, he could not make the sharp turns that the snitch did without losing speed, thereby allowing it to slip away from him at the last second.

Meanwhile, Cho Chang was catching up behind him. While the Nimbus 2000 was not as fast as the 2001, it was just as maneuverable, maybe even more so due to its slower speeds.

"Potter and Chang are neck and neck! The snitch is just in front of them!"

Out of his peripheral Harry saw that Cho Chang was indeed right next to him. She was so close that if he were to lift his hand and reach out, he would be more than capable of touching her. He judged the distance between them to be no less than a foot at most.

It seemed his opponent was getting a bit reckless.

Harry refocused the entirety of his attention on the snitch. It was right in front of them both, just two feet away, too far to grab but close enough that he had to resist the urge to reach out. Chang was already getting ready to reach for the small golden sphere with wings, with only one hand on the broom and the other hovering over a few centimeters off the sleek wooden surface of the handle.

His mind traveling a hundred miles a minute, Harry tried to figure out the best possible way to get the snitch before his female opponent did. They were about dead even right now. The superior speed of his broom meant very little when he couldn't go full-throttle on it. Right now it was all down to the individual skill of the riders. He quickly determined that if he wanted to win this, he would have to do something reckless and unexpected.

That something came a minute later during one of the snitches loop-de-loops. It seemed to be fond of those for some reason, as it had already done ten in the past five minutes. Rather than try to follow it, which was what Chang did, Harry simply barrel rolled until he was upside down, and then let go of the brooms handle.

"Holy shite!—"

"Lee Jordan! No—oh my!"

"—Harry Potter just let go of his broom!"

Harry ignored the chorus of cries that rung out loud enough that even he could hear them. He ignored the teachers trying to shoot the levitation spell at him as he fell. He ignored everything except that tiny ball as it fluttered about in front of him.

Quicker than lightning itself, Harry's hand flew out and snatched the snitch from the air. He brought his hand into his chest and then looked down to see the earth looming closer and closer with each passing second. None of the teachers had been able to catch him, though he could see what looked like Professor Dumbledore trying to, but the fact that he had straightened his profile and was now dive-bombing towards the ground made it so that he was too fast for any of them to catch.

Looking down at the ground, Harry Potter narrowed his eyes and grit his teeth. He swung his legs forward, forcing his body to rotate until he was falling towards the ground feet first. He then began channeling as much of his magic as he could into his shoes, imagining himself not falling, but slowly gliding towards the ground. There was no way he would be able to keep himself from stopping his descent, but he could at least slow it enough to the point where he could absorb the rest of the impact relatively easily.

His feet soon hit the ground, and Harry immediately bent his legs to absorb most of the shock from the impact. He then threw himself into a forward roll, ignoring the small jolt of pain in his knees as he rolled along the grass, then kipped back up a second later.

Silence. The entire crowd had gone silent as they watched Harry fall to the earth. Looking up at the stands he could see several gaping mouths with his enhanced vision. His friends were also looking like they'd just shat themselves.

Within the silence, Harry raised his hand and showed them the snitch.

"Harry Potter has the snitch! Gryffindor wins!"

XoX

After the Quidditch game between Ravenclaw and Gryffindor, everyone from all four houses who wanted to come were invited to a party within the Great Hall. The celebration had come about thanks to a discussion Harry had with Professor McGonagall on building closer ties between the four houses. After mentioning how he would like any victory by Gryffindor to be shared with the rest of the school and visa versa, the normally stern Transfiguration professor had gone to Headmaster Dumbledore and the

other three Head of Houses about his idea to host a party at the end of the Hogwarts Quidditch Cup for all of the houses. All of them with the exception of Snape had agreed that it was a good idea and had the house elves set the party up in advance with the only thing needed being the decoration to celebrate the house that won.

All around the room, hanging on the walls and ceiling were red and gold banners with the image of a lion that was sitting on it's haunches. Every so often the lion would let out a ferocious roar. Floating around the room were more banners for the other four houses, as well large posters that depicted some of the best maneuvers and plays pulled off by the various teams and individuals during the Quidditch season. Among those posters were seven specifically for the Gryffindor team, each one showing the plays and moves pulled off by one of the teams members.

The four long tables had been removed from the room, and there was now only a single table set up in the center. Plates and bowls were filled to the brim and overflowing with drinks and food: yams, potatoes, various types of meat and breads, as well as a a number of different deserts.

As per Harry's suggestion there was more than just pumpkin juice to drink this time. Several of the bowls containing beverages were filled with fruit punch, fizzy drinks, mundane sodas like coke and pepsi, along with some butterbear. The house elves had really done outstanding work to get all of the drinks Harry had suggested. He was going to have to do something nice for them.

The staff table was still in the room, set up near the back as always. It was there that the professors conversed amongst themselves and watched their students interact from afar. They all seemed quite pleased with how well everyone appeared to be getting along—with the obvious exception of Snape who looked like he wanted to be anywhere other than where he currently was. None looked more pleased than Dumbledore himself however, who was beaming brightly as he watched the students mingle.

As he looked around the room, Harry saw a good deal of people from all four houses. There were even a few Slytherins that were not among his group of friends who had chosen to see what this was all about. They

were keeping mostly to themselves, but the mere fact that they were there at all could be taken as a victory as far as Harry was concerned.

The twins were over on one side of the room and looked like they were putting on a comedy routine of some kind. He didn't know what they were doing exactly, but the crowd surrounding them, laughing and cheering seemed to be enjoying whatever display they were putting on.

Over in another corner he could see the three Gryffindor Chasers, Katie, Alicia and Angelina, speaking with the Chasers from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. Even with his enhanced sense of hearing, he could not make out what they were saying. He could lip read however, and it looked to him like they were discussing Quidditch tactics and strategies.

Oliver Wood, looking rather overjoyed at having won his second Quidditch Cup in a row was speaking with a few older gentlemen that most definitely did not go to Hogwarts. Recruiters, Harry knew, as they had already spoken with him about possibly becoming a member for the teams they represented after he graduated from Hogwarts. While the idea of being an international sports star held some appeal, it was not something he felt would benefit him at the moment, so he had politely declined but promised to keep in touch.

"And Harry Potter strikes again it seems," Tracey's words diverted Harry's attention away from his observations of the room and towards her. Like always he was surrounded by his friends. Blaise and Neville were talking with Lisa about plants that were historically used to brew potions, and Terry and Tracey were, or had been, arguing about one thing or another. It now looked like Terry was talking to Hannah and Susan about something. Daphne was, as per the usual, standing by his side, absently sipping at some fruit punch. She seemed to have taken a liking to the stuff.

"Excuse me?"

"Don't give me that look," Tracey said when he raised an eyebrow at her. "We all know this party is your doing. You're the only one that could have possibly thought something like this up."

Harry shrugged, not denying her accusation. "I may have suggested the

idea to Professor McGonagall after class one day."

"I knew it!" Tracey snapped, grinning like she had just won the lottery. He didn't know why she was so excited about being right over something like this, but then, Tracey was a bit of an oddball. She was a very excitable girl. "Mr. Big-shot politician strikes again!"

Harry just barely managed to contain his grimace. Talk of politics reminded him of the epic disaster that was the New Year Gala. It would be a long time before he got over how his arrogance had cost him a good deal of political support.

"This has nothing to do with politics," at least not the kind of politics Tracey was talking about. Harry didn't actually gain anything from this function. No one aside from his friends and the professors even knew the idea came from him. He was simply trying to help promote school unity so his plans later on would be accomplished that much more easily.

"Sure it doesn't," Tracey gave him a sly look, "And I'm the bloody tooth fairy."

"I'm surprised you even know what the tooth fairy is."

"I am a half-blood you know," crossing her arms over her chest, Tracey gave her raven-haired friend a pout. "I know what the tooth fairy is."

"Tracey's thoughts aside," Daphne intruded before any more banter could be thrown about, "I do think this was a good idea. Ever since the war with You-Know-Who, Hogwarts has suffered from prejudice of one kind or another, depending on which house you're in. This is an excellent way to bridge the gap."

"Thank you," Harry accepted her praise graciously, giving the young girl by his side a smile that Daphne returned just as readily.

"Ugh, look at you two, acting all lovey dovey," Tracey pretended to gag, causing Daphne to glare at her. "Seriously, you guys are twelve. Do you guys really have to put on that adult act of yours all the time?"

"No," Harry was the one to answer, "Just most of the time."

"Whatever."

"Hey," Neville's voice interrupted all the other conversations within their small group. When Harry and the others looked at him, it was to see the boy looking a tad bit confused. "Does anyone know where Hermione is?"

Harry blinked, then looked around. Now that Neville had mentioned it, he'd not seen Hermione since the start of the party.

"I think she said something about needing to use the loo," Lisa answered Neville. Her face then took on a befuddled expression that caused her brow to wrinkle and her lips to purse. "Though that was almost fifteen minutes ago. Going to the restroom shouldn't have taken that long."

"Isn't the closest restroom the one on the second floor?" asked Hannah.

"No," Lisa shook her head, "The closest restroom to the Great Hall is in the dungeons, but Hermione probably used the one on the second floor just because no one really likes using the ones in the dungeon." Most of the students felt the dungeon was creepy, especially those who did not come from a magical background. The idea of using the loo in the dungeons disturbed them.

"If I'm not mistaken, that's the restroom that Myrtle haunts, right?" asked Harry as he dredged up the memory he had learned that piece of knowledge from. Myrtle had been a student at Hogwarts, but was killed during another incident in which the Chamber of Secrets had been opened, according to Professor Dumbledore.

"Yep," Tracey nodded her head emphatically, "Don't know why she would want to use that bathroom though. I mean, who wants to deal with Moaning Myrtle while they're trying to use the loo?"

Conversation flowed throughout the hall for several more minutes before Peeves flew in through the Great Halls entrance doors.

"Death! Death! There's a dead person in these halls!" The Poltergeist shouted, silencing the entire room. "Seen it with my own eyes, I have! She's dead!"

There was silence for all of one or two seconds, right before the entire hallway became chaotic. People started shouting, many started panicking, a good number also just seemed frozen solid, as if unsure of what to do. Among the mass of fearful students, Harry stood with his friends, a sinking feeling in his gut.

BANG!

A loud sound like a canon going off echoed through the Great Hall, causing everyone to stop whatever they were doing and turn to look at the staff table. Professor Dumbledore was standing there, his wand out and still smoking from the spell he had used.

"I must ask that everyone remain calm," Dumbledore said in an even voice. When he got silence in return, he nodded. "Good. Now then, will the Head of Houses and prefects please escort everyone back to their common rooms. The rest of staff will come with me."

The faculty quickly took charge of the situation, with each Head of House gathering up their students and leading them out of the Great Hall.

Harry and his group were soon split up. He and Neville went with Professor McGonagall. Meanwhile, the others each went over to their respective Head of House. As the young man with raven colored hair walked alongside his friend and the dozens of other Gryffindor students, all of whom were talking to each other in hushed whispers, the sinking feeling in his gut began to grow.

Hermione still hadn't returned from her trip to the bathroom.

XoX

Harry, Neville and the other Gryffindor students were all directed back towards the common room, whereupon entering they congregated around the main room instead of heading up to the dorms. They were all too restless to try and get any sleep despite the hour.

Leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest and a small, almost unnoticeable frown etched onto his face, Harry Potter resisted the urge to start pacing. There were few things in this world that

he could say truly agitated him. Not knowing something that someone else did was one of them, and not being constantly aware of what was happening around him at any given time was another.

This particular instance was a case of the latter.

"Hermione's still not back yet," Neville said. Harry turned his head to look at the slightly round-faced boy. His friend wasn't leaning against the wall like he was, but standing in place with his left leg bouncing up and down with the hyperactivity of a person with ADHD who'd just been fed several pounds of sugar. Like Harry, Neville also looked rather worried.

"No, she hasn't." Harry didn't say anything else. There was no need to. They both knew what the other was worried about, and neither of them wanted to be right.

Glancing around the room revealed a glimpse at all the other students. Everyone was looking at least a little bit off-kilter, as if they still weren't sure what to make of Peeves announcement. Harry knew how they felt.

While he was observing the crowd, Fred and George Weasley walked up to him.

"Harry," there was no playfulness in Fred's tone, "Have you seen Ginny?"

"Ginny?" Harry frowned, "You're sister?"

"That's the one."

Harry's frown deepened as his mind searched through his memory, rewinding the time from the point just after he'd caught the snitch to now. He soon came to the startling realization that he had not seen Ginny at all. Even after backtracking further in the day all the way to when he first woke up this morning. Odd. He usually saw Ginny sitting alone at the Gryffindor table at least once a day during breakfast.

"I'm sorry," Harry addressed Fred and George with a genuinely apologetic look, "I don't know where she is. I haven't seen her all day."

"Damn," George said, biting his thumbnail in worry, "I was hoping you

might have seen her."

After studying the two nearly identical twins, Harry couldn't help but ask, "Is something wrong?"

Fred and George looked at each other. They then looked back at Harry. Fred shrugged. "We're...we're not sure. Ginny's been acting odd ever since this summer. We all just thought it was just pre-Hogwarts jitters. I mean, everyone gets nervous when they first start going here. But even after school started up, she continued acting strange. She hasn't made any friends as far as we know. She hasn't even made an attempt."

"Ginny's never been the most outgoing of people," George added, "But she's not some wall flower either. We expected her to make a few really good friends at the start of school, but it's now nearing the end of the year and she still hasn't made a single friend. It's like she doesn't even care."

Harry didn't know Ginny very well, or at all really, so he couldn't judge how accurate their words were. Knowing the twins as he did though, they were likely speaking the truth. Pranksters they may be, but they wouldn't lie about something like this.

"Have you asked any of the other first years?" he asked. The twins nodded their heads.

"Yeah, and they said they haven't seen her all day either."

"I see. Sorry I can't be of much help."

"It's fine," George said, looking tired, "It was a long shot. We know you don't really spend any time with her. We just thought you might know where she is because she's got an uber-large crush on you."

Harry had not known that. Though now that they had mentioned it, all that stuttering and blushing she did when they ran into each other in the halls made more sense now.

"Anyway, we're going to keep asking around," Fred continued where they left off, "If you find out anything, you'll let us know, right?"

"Of course," Harry nodded.

The two older Gryffindor boys waved at Harry as they waded into the crowd once more. Cupping a hand to his chin, the young wizard prodigy thought about this new information he'd been given.

Truth be told he'd not paid much attention to the youngest of the Weasley's. It had nothing to do with dislike or anything negative. She simply didn't appear on his radar. There was no real benefit to going out of his way to befriend her. All of the friends he had now he'd approached with a purpose. Lisa and Terry were in Ravenclaw, and therefore could help him bridge the gap between their house and Gryffindor. Blaise, Daphne, and Tracey were in Slytherin and served the same purpose. Blaise and Daphne were also members of two very powerful Ancient and Most Noble Houses and held a lot of political power in the wizarding world. Susan and Hannah were in Hufflepuff, and Susan's aunt was the head of the DMLE, a very prestigious position. That she belonged to one of the Founding Five was just the icing on the cake. Neville was a Longbottom. Longstanding tradition dictated that he and Harry were allies due to the Potter/Longbottom alliance that had been forged several hundred years back. Befriending him was a given.

Each of them held value that gave him a reason to approach them. It might seem callous of him, but Harry had not initially held any intention of actually being their friends, at least no conscious intention of befriending them. Discovering that he actually truly liked the people he'd formed such close bonds with was something that had come later. And though he could say he really did like the people he had befriended, it didn't change how he thought. Ginny was a non-entity. She could not offer him anything, could not bring anything unique to the table. There was simply no benefit to letting her become a part of his circle of friends.

It was while he was thinking these thoughts that the portrait entrance swung open to reveal Professor McGonagall. From the very moment Harry had set eyes on her, he could tell something was wrong. The normally imperturbable woman looked positively frazzled. Not just in her appearance, which was nowhere near as immaculate as usual, but in her demeanor. She appeared downtrodden, weighed down, as if she bore a heavy weight on her shoulders. Not only that, but there was also a deep

sense of loss and foreboding coming off her in waves. Even Neville, who had no real experience with catching the emotions of others could feel it, if the way his body was tensing under the woman's presence were any indication.

The transfiguration professor swept into the common room, causing everyone there to cease any and all conversation and focus the entirety of their attention on her.

"There has been an...incident," Professor McGonagall said, pausing for a second as if she were not quite sure how to word what she wanted to tell them. "Two more attacks have occurred. One of those attacks has left one student dead and another taken." Gasps emerged from just about everyone in the room. Harry's fists tightened until his knuckles turned white. "The person who was taken is Ginny Weasley." Almost as soon as she spoke Fred, George and Percy were marching towards her with the purpose of demanding to know more. Professor McGonagall stopped them in their tracks with a freezing look. "Your parents are being notified as we speak. It is likely they will be here within the hour, along with a group of aurors."

Here, Professor McGonagall paused. The internal struggle going on was clear as day to Harry, who could almost feel the blood draining from his face when the woman's gaze flickered over to him and Neville.

"The student who has been killed is none other than Hermione Granger." More gasps came. Harry felt his legs weaken and threaten to send him spilling to the floor. "Her parents are also being notified and we are making every effort to find her attacker. Because of this attack, Hogwarts is being shut down while the aurors begin their investigation." She looked at all the students with the most grave expression any of them had ever seen. "All students including prefects are not to leave their common rooms until the aurors arrive to escort you to the Hogwarts Express. Anybody attempting to leave will be punished severely."

She looked back at Harry and Neville with a pitying gaze, and then swept out of the room, leaving many of the students in an uproar and Harry feeling like someone had just gouged a hole in his chest.

We're nearing the end of book 2 of my Harry Potter series and it looks like I've dropped a bomb on you guys. I'm sure this chapter is going to catch a lot of flak. I'm equally sure that a good number of people will probably stop reading this story altogether. If you wish to find out what my thoughts were when I wrote this chapter and why I did what I did (and you guys all know what I'm talking about), then you can check out my blog tomorrow where I'll be posting my reasons.

The One Who Call Himself Heir

For those of you who decided to stick around after I killed off Hermione Granger, I would like to thank you. I know it's not always easy when your favorite canon heroine is killed off. That you're placing your trust in me means a lot. So thanks.

Now on with the story.

Chapter 22: The One Who Calls Himself Heir

It would not come as a surprise to most that Harry Potter had been unable to sleep that night. Indeed, very few people in Gryffindor had been able to get much sleep. Most had stayed up well into the night and only went to bed when their bodies demanded rest. The last to fall asleep that night had been Neville, who spent most of his time after Professor McGonagall's announcement lying on his bed in a complete daze.

Much like his friend, Harry's mind had been in a hazy state since their Head of House dropped the bomb on them. It was not a dissimilar feeling to when someone was only half awake; not quite asleep but not really alert either. He knew he was awake, he could feel it, but his mind felt like it was still asleep, like all this was a dream.

If only that were true. Maybe if it was he wouldn't be feeling this way.

After lying on his bed for several hours, Harry Potter decided to leave. He couldn't stay there, lying in bed and trying to rest with the news that one of his friends was dead. And so, wrapped in his invisibility cloak and with a disillusionment charm thrown over him for good measure, the young, emerald eyed boy left the dorms, and then the Gryffindor common room altogether.

He silently made his way down the many halls and winding corridors that made up Hogwarts. Having spent two years within these halls, Harry had memorized every nook and cranny of the place. At least those places he had been to. Right now, the destination he was traveling towards was

one he had visited a number of times last year due to one reason or another.

The walk was not very long. A mere fifteen minutes. He'd managed to cut his time by taking several secret passages he had discovered by accident. It also helped him avoid the many aurors that were now crowding the place. And there were a lot of them. He had only used three halls in total, but had run into six aurors in that time. Despite this, he'd made it to his destination and now he stood in front of the doors to the hospital wing.

Should he go in? The question plagued him. If his friend were to be anywhere within the school, it would be inside the hospital wing. He wanted to see her. He wanted to see her so badly. And yet at the same time, he was afraid. A part of him had yet to accept Hermione's death. So long as he did not see her body, he could pretend that she was still alive.

'But for how long?' His mind asked him. How long would he be able to feign ignorance? By tomorrow morning the news of Hermione's death would have spread throughout Hogwarts. Everyone would know, not just the Gryffindors. Would he be able to pretend then? Would he be able to act like she was still alive after that? Probably not.

With a trepidation he had never felt before, Harry slowly opened the door that led into the hospital wing and stepped inside. A quick look around revealed that no one was there. Madame Pomfrey must have been in a staff meeting. He looked over at the beds. Professor Lockhart was lying in one of them, the one closest to the entrance, his face set in a mask of surprise. The one farthest from the entrance had another figure, one whose entire body was covered by a blanket.

Harry felt his knees weaken. He didn't want to see anymore. His mind screamed at him to leave. It told him that if he left now, he wouldn't have to be confronted by the reality of what happened, that he didn't have to do this.

And yet, in spite of his mind telling him to go back, his body moved forward. He walked towards the bed, his steps sounding loudly in his ears despite the silencing charm that had been cast over him. His heart was

beating erratically in his chest, causing his breathing to come out in harsh pants that sounded more like a dying man than the perfectly healthy young man that he was.

He stopped by the bed. From where he stood he could see the lump much more clearly now. The contours revealed that the body hidden underneath the blanket was a budding female. His experienced eyes could pick out very specific details, familiar details about the shape. And each time they did something in his chest cracked. Despite not wanting to, his hand slowly grabbed the covers near the head of the bed and pulled them back.

Harry did not gasp. Not a sound came out of his mouth, even though it had opened wide along with his eyes. He should have not been surprised by what he saw, and yet he was, he was very surprised.

The sound of something shattering rang in his ears. It was all internal however, there was no one here but him. Him and the body of one of his friends.

Hermione lay there on the bed. He could not see her body as it was still under the covers, but he could see her face. Her eyes were closed and her mouth slightly parted. She would have looked like she was simply sleeping peacefully were it not for the deathly pale tone her skin had taken and the fact that she was not breathing.

A shaking hand reached out and touched Hermione's face. Her skin was cold. Deathly cold. It was like the skin of someone who'd been standing outside for hours in the middle of a Scotland winter. If ever there were any proof he needed of his friend's demise, this was it.

The hand jerked away from Hermione's face as if scalded. As Harry dropped to his knees that same hand moved to his mouth as bile rose up into his throat. Despite trying not to let it escape, vomit leaked out of his mouth and between his fingers, spilling to the floor. It took nearly five minutes before his bodies physical reaction to the death of someone he cared about subsided, but what took its place was far worse, and Harry almost wished the sickness would return.

Despair. Hopelessness. An unfathomable anguish that mere words could

never hope to describe. It filled his being, tearing into his spirit with the force of a hurricane. So powerful was this emotion that it sent Harry spilling to the floor as his legs gave out, no longer able to support his weight as they should have.

His friend was dead. Why? Why was she dead? She had done nothing to deserve this fate. Hermione had never done anything to anyone. Who could possibly want her dead?

The person who took her life, that's who. Harry was beginning to regret not taking a more proactive approach in apprehending the criminal. It was clear to him now that none of the adults were capable of solving this mystery, and now one of his friends was dead because of it. If he had actually bothered to investigate this wouldn't have happened. Hermione would still be alive and the person responsible for the attacks would have been sent to jail.

Blood began spilling onto his lips as he grit his teeth. Someone had killed his friend. He didn't know who they were, but it didn't matter. It didn't matter because he was going to kill them. And the best place to start looking was the second floor girls restroom where Hermione had gone during the party.

XoX

After the first incident with the petrification of Filch's cat and the writing on the wall, Harry had originally determined that someone was using the Chamber of Secrets myth as a scare tactic to terrify the school. That thought had stayed with him all throughout the year. If the chamber did indeed exist, then only the heir of Slytherin would be able to open it.

Those thoughts had fled upon discovering that Hermione was dead. Only the *Avada Kadavra* was capable of killing someone without leaving a mark. Cursed objects that could kill without leaving so much as a sign were even more rare. Often times cursed objects designed to kill someone did so violently, the dark nature of their curse ensuring that whoever came into contact with it was maimed in some way, shape or form. This left only two options as to how Hermione had died: first, someone had used the killing curse on her; second, the Chamber of

Secrets was real and Slytherin's monster was capable of killing without leaving so much as a mark. Either way, this meant he only had one option available to him if he wanted to discover the truth.

Upon arriving at the girls second floor restroom, Harry found himself frowning. His eyes narrowed as he studied the facility, taking in every intricate detail about his surroundings. Nothing looked out of place; the water had been cleaned up and the stalls were as pristine as the stalls of a loo could be.

And yet...

Harry's nose twitched as he caught a whiff of the strange scent in the air. It was a smell he could not quite qualify, but if he had to take a gander, he would say it was the scent of death mixed with something else. Not a very pleasant smell to be sure, and it was strong. Whatever had caused it had come through recently.

"Who's there?" Turning his head, the young boy was greeted by the sight of Moaning Myrtle. Her appearance was that of a typical nerdy girl, complete with glasses and pimples on her face. She was not very attractive, but Harry supposed such things didn't matter much when you were dead. "Oh, it's you." And she had such a pleasant demeanor too. "What are you doing here? You know boys aren't allowed in the girls bathroom."

"How did you die?" Harry asked with none of the subtlety he usually went for. In his anger and need to find Hermione's killer, tact appeared to have flown out the window.

"How I died?" Moaning Myrtle looked surprised for a second, but then a smile lit her face. She actually looked please to know that someone was curious about her death. What an odd girl. "Ooooh, it was dreadful. It happened right in here. I died in this very stall. I remember it so well. I'd hidden because Olive Hornby was teasing me about my glasses. The door was locked, and I was crying, and then I heard somebody come in. They said something funny. A different language, I think it must have been. Anyway, what really got me was that it was a boy speaking. So I unlocked the door, to tell him to go and use his own toilet, and

then—"Myrtle swelled with a sense of self-importance, her face shining. "—I died."

Harry frowned. She died? Just like that? One minute she was opening to stall to tell some boy to piss off and the next she died? "How did you die?"

"No idea," said Myrtle, shrugging. "I just remember seeing a pair of great, big, yellow eyes. My whole body sort of seized up, and then I was floating away" had Harry been in his right mind, the dreamy look on Myrtles face when she spoke of herself dying would have probably disturbed him. "And then I came back again. I was determined to haunt Olive Hornby, you see. Oh, she was sorry she'd ever laughed at my glasses."

"And where exactly did you see these eyes?"

"Somewhere over there," Myrtle said, pointing off towards the sink near her toilet.

Harry walked over to the sink in question and began to search. The sink did not look much different from any other sink. It was, in all regards, fairly ordinary. However, after giving it a thorough once over, he saw something that made his eyes narrow into small slits: the carving of a snake scratched onto one of the copper caps.

"That taps never worked," Myrtle informed him helpfully.

"I see," Harry said, studying the sink with a critical eye. Was this really the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets? He guessed there was only one way to find out.

Moving to stand directly in front of the faucet, Harry glared at the object made of porcelain and pipes.

"*Open*," he hissed. Myrtle gasped.

"That's the way that other boy was speaking!"

The tap began glowing with a brilliant white light. Soon it began to spin. And then it began to move; the entire sink began moving down, sinking

into the floor which opened up to reveal a large pipe that was more than wide enough for several grown men to fit through with ease. Harry Potter stared down into the darkened shaft, his glowing green eyes barely able to pick out any details due to how little light reached the inside.

Without further ado, he allowed himself to fall feet first into the hole. His body hit the inside of the pipe. The entire interior was slick with slime. It made traveling down it easier, though not at all pleasant. As he slid down he could see other pipes branching off from his own. They were smaller, too small for him to fit through.

Just as he was beginning to wonder if this tunnel would ever end, the pipe leveled out, and Harry was shot out of the end. He managed to land on his feet, but because of how slippery the floor and his shoes now were, he ended up falling down.

Standing up and casting a cleaning charm on his clothes and shoes, Harry looked at his new surroundings. His wand lit up like a flare in the night, casting away some of the darkness and letting him see the dark, slime covered walls. This tunnel was definitely far below the school, and judging by how much moisture had gathered, he might even be below the lake.

With nothing there for him, Harry set off, traveling deeper into the tunnel. The lumos spell lighting his wand and his animal enhanced vision allowed him to see much further than most. As he walked along the tunnel, a crunching sound was heard underneath him. Looking down, he saw that it was bones. Hundreds of bones from what looked like both animal and human. Were these skeletal remains of all the victims of the monster that lived in this chamber?

After traveling for several dozen feet, Harry paused upon seeing something large and curved laying against the tunnel floor. A moments inspection revealed it to be a snake skin, a very large snake skin that was poisonous green in color. It was lying curled up across the floor. With a speculative eye, Harry judged the skin to be at least twenty feet long.

How long ago had this been shed? Had the monster of Slytherin still been growing when it shed this skin? How large was it now?

Walking up to it, Harry placed his hand against the skin. It was rough and leathery. Very hard too. Not to mention it was likely incredibly durable. Would a spell even be able to penetrate something so thick? How much magic would it cost him?

Shaking his head, Harry continued on. There was no point worrying about these kinds of problems right now.

He continued making his way down the tunnel, well past the snake skin. Eventually, he came upon a solid wall that blocked his path, upon which a carving of two entwined serpents could be seen, their eyes set with gleaming emeralds.

Walking up to them, Harry did not hesitate to hiss in parseltongue. "Open." And just like that, the wall cracked up. The two halves slid smoothly into the walls on either side, out of sight, revealing a large chamber beyond the doorway. Harry did not hesitate to walk inside.

Sharp green eyes surveyed their surroundings. Standing on either side of him were towering stone pillars that rose to support the ceiling with entwined snakes carved into them. These tall monoliths, which rose so high their tops were cast in shadow, cast long, ominous shadows through the unusual, green light that filled the room.

With his wand out and at the ready, Harry walked further into the chamber. His eyes flickered about, searching for threats that were not there. His senses were going haywire in this place, telling him that he was in danger when no danger had presented itself. What was this ominous feeling?

He eventually came to the last pair of pillars. Craning his neck to look up, Harry found himself staring into a gigantic face. It was the face of an ancient looking man, with a long, gray beard that traveled down, almost reaching the bottom of the wizard's sweeping stone robes, where two enormous feet stood on the smooth stone floor. As he stared at the base of the statue, his eyes were inexorably drawn towards the figure with flaming-red hair that was lying between those feet: it was Ginny.

Keeping a wary eye on his surroundings, Harry slowly walked up to the girl. When he reached her, the young boy knelt down and used his free

hand to carefully turn her over so she was lying on her back. Ginny's face was pale, whiter than even the ghosts that haunted Hogwarts's halls, and it was cold. Her eyes were closed, and his sharp vision picked up the slow rise and fall of her chest. She was not petrified, that much was certain.

Two fingers pressed against her neck, checking her pulse. It was a faint, and getting fainter as the seconds passed, but it was still there.

So, Ginny was here, but where was her captor? According to the writing he'd seen on the wall before entering the second floor girls bathroom, someone had taken Ginny down here. Yet he'd not seen another soul since entering. Where were they?

The sound of two feet lightly padding along the stone floor drew his attention away from the comatose female. Quick as whip he stood up and pointed his wand at the robed figure walking towards him. "Who are you?" Harry demanded of the tall young man with hair as black as Harry's and eyes that were just as dark that had appeared before him.

"That's right, we haven't been properly introduced, have we?" the young man said, his tone conversational, as if he were speaking about the weather or what he would like to have for dinner. "My name is Tom Marvolo Riddle. It's a pleasure to meet you, Harry Potter. I've heard so much about you."

Harry frowned. He didn't recognize him, and considering he knew the face of every student in Hogwarts, that should not have been possible.

"I've never heard of any Tom Riddle at Hogwarts," Harry narrowed his eyes into a glare. "You're not a student here."

"Not anymore," Tom Riddle corrected with a very slight, yet very smug smirk. "I went to Hogwarts many years ago, graduated at the top of my class, and went on to become one of the greatest wizards to ever grace this world."

The frown deepened. Harry had never heard of a Tom Riddle before. Ever. The only Tom he knew of was the barkeep of the Leaky Cauldron, and that Tom might be a kind old man, but he was nowhere near great.

"I am told that you're quite the achiever as well," Tom continued, forcing Harry out of his introspection. Blinking his eyes back into focus, the young boy with the lightning bolt scar on his forehead stared at the other male. "I've heard that you're at the top of your class in every subject, and that you have managed to earn some of the highest marks Hogwarts has ever seen. That's quite remarkable in one so young."

Perhaps it was the tone in the older boy's voice, or maybe it was the almost lustful gleam in his eyes, but Harry felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. How did this Tom Riddle person know so much about him? How could he have snuck into this school, opened the Chamber of Secrets, killed one of the students and kidnapped another without anyone being the wiser? There was something he was missing, a piece to this puzzle that was just out of reach.

Trying not to let on how disconcerted he was, Harry observed the other boy further. It was then that he noticed something; Tom Riddle's form was not consisted or in any way solid. It wavered in and out of focus, as if it were some kind of illusion created by swirling mists. "What are you?" he asked. Tom Riddle smirked.

"I am a memory. A memory that has been preserved within a diary for fifty years."

Upon hearing this, Harry's eyes flickered over to Ginny, where they found a diary, the very same diary he'd seen her holding many nights ago, laying weakly within her grasp.

"You're a memory who has managed to regain a semi-corporeal form by feeding off the energy of Ginny," Harry's mind ran several hundred miles per second as he created an on the spot hypothesis. Of course, even with that basic hypothesis made, there were still a number of holes. What kind of magic was this? How could a diary contain a memory? And how could a memory gain a physical form?

"Very good," Tom Riddle brought his hands up and clapped in a slow, mocking manner. "You truly are a genius, to be able to come up with such an on the spot theory with so little information. Yes, I have managed to regain much of my form by draining young Ginny's life. The stupid little

girl has been writing in my diary for months now, telling me all her pitiful worries and woes—how her brothers tease her, how she had to come to school with secondhand robes and books, how—" Riddle's eyes glinted, "—how she didn't think famous, good, great Harry Potter would ever like her"

Harry Potter tried to keep a calm demeanor as he continued listening to Riddle speak. The longer the older boy talked, the harder it became. But he kept his cool and exercised restraint. He needed more information before acting. This Tom Riddle might have been the one who opened the Chamber, but someone else was behind this, pulling the strings. The person who gave Ginny the diary. He needed to know who they were.

"It was very boring, having to listen to the silly little troubles of an eleven-year-old girl," he continued digging his grave. The more he said the more information Harry acquired. It was only a matter of time before he had enough to deal with Riddle. Just keep him talking. "But I was patient. I wrote back. I was sympathetic, and I was kind. Ginny simply loved me. No one's ever understood me like you, Tom...I'm so glad I've got this diary to confide in...it's like having a friend you can carry around in your pocket..."

A shrill, piercing laugh escaped from Riddle's mouth. The sound caused Harry to wince as the intense vibrations it caused rattled his overly sensitive eardrums.

"If I say it myself, Harry, I've always been able to charm the people I needed. So Ginny poured out her soul to me, and her soul happened to be exactly what I wanted...I grew stronger and stronger on a diet of her deepest fears, her darkest secrets. I grew powerful, far more powerful than little Miss Weasley. Powerful enough to start feeding Miss Weasley a few of my secrets, to start pouring a little of my soul back into her. . ."

"I see..." Harry looked back down at Ginny for a second, before his eyes moved back to Riddle. "So Ginny is the one who opened the Chamber of Secrets. You controlled her like some kind of puppet." He didn't know who he was angrier at, Ginny for being so stupid as to listen to a diary that could talk back, or Riddle for being the one who coerced her into opening the Chamber of Secrets in the first place.

"That's right," Riddle smiled, "I was the one who made her open the Chamber of Secrets. There's no way she or anyone else would have been able to open it without my help." He then adopted a genuinely confused look, even as he stared at Harry with a speculative gleam. "Which is why I am so surprised you were able to open it."

So Riddle was fishing for information? Well, he wouldn't get anything out of Harry.

"That still doesn't explain who you are or why you would do this." Keep calm, Potter. Don't screw this up. You need to learn everything you can before wiping this man from the face of the planet. "What reason could you possibly have for returning to Hogwarts and opening the Chamber of Secrets? Who even gave you to Ginny in the first place?"

"Now that would be telling." Harry "tsked." So it seemed he wasn't the only one who realized the other was trying to gleam information from them. The boy was intelligent, he would give him that. Unfortunately for Harry, this was going to make things much more difficult. "As for my reasons for returning to Hogwarts...well, I suppose at first it was to continue Salazar's noble work of ridding the magical world of its filth. Those we call mudbloods, or something like that." Harry's hands clenched into fists. "However, after spending nearly a year with young Ginny, I found myself wanting to go after a new target: you."

"Me?" Through his anger and outrage towards the young man standing before him, Harry felt confusion. What did the memory of a person who had gone to Hogwarts around fifty years ago want with him? "Why?"

"Oh, I have many reasons, I suppose," Tom had to have known his words were getting to Harry. His eyes were gleaming as he spoke, an odd luster that shone within them and caused his younger counterpart to shudder in revulsion. "You and I are quite alike, you know. Both orphans, both model students. Our talent for magic far surpasses everyone else. From the way stupid little Ginny praises your very name, you'd think you were the reincarnation of Merlin himself."

The look in Tom Riddle's eyes turned hungry.

"Ever since learning of you from Ginny I wanted to meet you," Tom

continued softly. "I have so many questions I want to ask. Of course, actually getting your attention was quite difficult. You don't do anything unless it benefits you in some way, and chasing after the mystery of the Chamber of Secrets holds no benefit. I needed something to get your attention. It took a while. When those aurors showed up I was forced to go to ground, but that may have been a blessing in disguise. While the aurors were investigating I increase my hold over Ginny, taking more and more of her essence into myself until she was but a shell. By the time I decided to act, Ginny was nothing more than a vessel for my will."

"Decided to act..." Harry's eyes widened as he instantly caught onto what Tom was saying. "Hermione!"

"Yes," Tom's smile was anything but pleasant. "Your little mudblood friend was the perfect target."

So that was the reason Hermione was dead? Because this man, this psychotic, megalomaniac of a man wanted to get his attention?

Harry's blood began to boil.

"I had actually thought about killing one of the others," Tom continued, oblivious to Harry's building rage. "You're especially fond of that Greengrass girl, but killing someone of her stature would have caused a much more thorough investigation and I would have undoubtedly gotten caught." An almost nostalgic smile appeared on his face. "Ah Harry, you should have seen the look on her face when Ginny fired the killing curse at her. It was quite priceless. I was—"

"Avada Kedavra!"

Tom's eyes widened in shock the green light of the killing curse burst forth from the tip of Harry's wand and flew straight at him. Most unfortunately, it did not hit Tom, instead proceeded to go right through him as if he weren't even there. It then plowed into the statue directly behind Tom, taking a large chunk out of the statue.

"I'm impressed," Tom said genuinely, "Casting the Killing Curse at such a young age is quite the feat. Not everyone can cast that curse, even when they become adults." The smile became mocking as he looked his young

adversary over. "Though it looks like the task of firing off a killing curse is rather draining for you."

Harry grit his teeth as he stood there, hunched over, his breathing heavy. Several beads of sweat ran down his forehead and tried to get into his eyes. He blinked them away quickly, unwilling to let this man out of his sight for too long.

"I see, you must not have studied the killing curse in depth, have you?" Tom's grin was condescending as he looked down his nose at Harry, who longed to wipe that smug look from his face. If only he hadn't let his anger get the best of him. "If you had, then you would know that the killing curse doesn't just require a lot of hatred and the desire to kill. If that were the case, plenty of people would be able to use it. No, the killing curse requires an intense amount of control over one's magic...and it appears yours is in fluctuation."

"Tch!" Harry longed to deny those words, but couldn't. His magic was in fluctuation due to going through puberty early. Most people would never notice, and Harry was so good at magic that it usually wasn't a problem. Obviously, Tom was not most people. Or even a real person for that matter.

"Now, onto business," Tom quickly switched topics. "Tell me how you survived the night Voldemort killed your parents? Tell me how a mere child was able to destroy the greatest wizard known to man? The longer you talk, the longer I'll let you live."

"You think I'm going to tell you anything," Harry's breathing was harsh, but it wasn't fully due to casting the Killing Curse without knowing how. His rage was reaching its peak. This man had killed Hermione, his friend. He had killed her to get to him. Well, Tom had him now, and Harry was going to make sure he regretted that fact. "I'm not going to tell you a damn thing!"

Making a whipping motion with his wand, the world around Tom Riddle exploded in a shower of debris as Harry's overpowered bombarda destroyed the spot he was standing on. The attack should have blown a hole through Tom's body, but once again it had gone right through him.

without giving the man so much as a scratch.

"I see," Tom was no longer smiling. Indeed he looked rather angry. "So you're not going to tell me what I want to know? Very well then, I suppose that means your usefulness has come to an end."

Harry ignored the words as he began casting every spell he could think of. Bombarda's flew, Diffindos tried to slice Tom apart, and Reductos lit the tip of his wand and blew large chunks of stone from the walls. Nothing worked. They just went right through Tom, who ignored the spells and turned to look at the giant statue of Salazar Slytherin and began to hiss.

"Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four."

Harry looked up at the giant statue, his eyes narrowing at what he saw. The stone face, it was moving. Glaring into the darkness, the emerald eyed boy watched as the mouth opened wider and wider.

Slowly, Harry closed his eyes. What he had to do next would not be easy, especially as he had so foolishly wasted a good portion of his magic on an ill-attempted Killing Curse and all those other spells after. If he wanted to beat the beast of the chamber, then he would need to make every second count.

His magic pulsed. He could feel it, the center of his magic, the core of who he was. The barely closed gate within his soul that kept his magic at bay. But it was not just his core that he could feel. There was something else as well, two somethings in fact.

Harry opened the gate and allowed one of the two beings that represented him out. And as he unleashed his inner anime he began to morph, to change, to shift. He became something other than human.

The shifting from human to animal was a strange process. He could feel his legs getting longer, could feel his arms growing. His body began to compact and elongated at the same time, bones snapping as they were reshaped to match his chosen transformation. Even his nose and jaw were not able to escape the slightly uncomfortable feeling of morphing into that which he was technically not supposed to be. However, less

then a second of feeling his bones being snapped and his skin being stretched the transformation ended, and in Harry's place stood a creature of myth.

It had been a while since he'd used this transformation. He'd only transformed a couple of times, because the overlapping fields of vision he got from it gave him a migraine. Harry had only spent enough time in this form to understand the mechanics and powers it gave him.

"A griffin." If Harry Potter were not so overcome with anger at the man, he would have probably grinned at Tom's gaping expression. The young man didn't just look stunned, he looked utterly gobsmacked. "You're an animagus!? A griffin animagus!? That shouldn't be possible!"

Harry could have answered, if he wanted to. Unlike most animagus transformations, his griffin form was more than capable of communicating with people. If he'd felt like it, he could have said something.

He didn't. There was nothing to say to this man. Tom Riddle was a dead man walking, and he had no desire to speak with a dead man. Instead what Harry did was give his large wings a flap and take the the air. He was just in time to, because in that exact moment the creature of the Chamber of Secrets emerged from the statue.

So it was just as he thought. The creature was a Basilisk, and a very big one at that. In retrospect, it was fairly obvious that Slytherin's monster would be the king of serpents. The man had been a well-known parselmouth. Why wouldn't he get himself a giant snake that could kill people by simply staring at them and stick it in a school full of children?

Spanning what had to be at least fifty feet in length, the creature's entire circumference was enough that it could eat several Hagrids in one bite. It's scales were a poisonous green, and its mouth was a row of sharp fangs that could easily rend his flesh from his bones.

Bright, glowing yellow eyes peered up at Harry who, thanks to his animagus form, was capable of returning the look and not being killed. Magical creatures were not affected by the powers of other magical creatures.

"Kill him!"

As Tom Riddle commanded the Basilisk to slay him, the great creature responded to its master's orders, lunging at Harry's flying form like an uncoiling spring. The human turned griffin was able to dodge the attack, barrel-rolling out of the way. At the same time the snake head on his tail hissed at the much larger reptile and spat out several large globs of venom that hit the creature's scales. The venom hissed as it tried to eat away at the scales to no avail. The magic protecting the Basilisk was far stronger than Harry's magic.

The Basilisk attacked again and Harry was forced to ascend even higher. He traveled towards the ceiling, the great scaled beast following hot on his hooves. It stood on its tail, reaching its full height, which Harry soon realized was much longer than a mere fifty feet. The ceiling of the chamber had to be at least fifty-feet, and if it could stand all the way to the ceiling and still have several meters of tail left over for balance, it was definitely larger than fifty feet.

Large jaws snapped at him again, forcing Harry to swiftly descend. His mind began racing as the giant snake followed after him. He needed to find some way to kill this thing, and quickly, as his magic was beginning to run dry. Keeping up this transformation on top of having used a spell he simply wasn't prepared to cast was starting to take its toll.

Not knowing what he should do, Harry did his best to analyze everything he knew about Basilisks. It was admittedly not very much. He'd not studied magical creatures in depth and had only learned about the King of Serpents while looking through a magical creature glossary when he'd been researching information on griffins. He knew that all who looked into their eyes died, and that their venom was the most toxic and deadly poison in the world, as well as the fact that they could live for thousands of years, but that was about it.

First things first then. He needed to get rid of those eyes. As a griffin, he didn't have any powers that could pierce through those scales. Not to mention this animagus transformation was actually constantly draining his reserves due to the inherently magical nature of a griffin. But what could he use to rob the Basilisk of its sight? Maybe...it was a long shot,

he'd never tried it before, but it could work.

When the Basilisk came in for another attempt at taking a bite out of him, Harry ascended above the creature with a mighty flap of his wings. As he came in eye level with the giant serpent, the small hissing snake head acting as his tail spat out several large globs of a strangely viscous liquid.

His aim was slightly off due to how fast he was moving, but he'd spat out enough of the stuff that he still managed to hit the Basilisk's two glowing yellow eyes. The King of Serpents let out an unusually loud hiss. It reared its head back and shook it, accidentally bashing into one of the many serpent pillars that supported the ceiling. As the pillar came crashing down, Harry got a good look at the creature's eyes. Excellent. He'd managed to cover its eyes completely, and because it didn't have arms it wouldn't be able to pry the stuff off.

Unfortunately for Harry, his magic seemed to run dry, because in that moment his transformation ended. He reverted back to his human form and ended up crashing onto the ground below. At the very least he was quick enough to turn his crash landing into a roll, even if he still ended up smacking into one of the walls with bone rattling force.

"Don't think that just because you've robbed my pet of its eyesight means you've won!" Tom Riddle shouted. He sounded angry. Furious even. Good, that would make dealing with him much easier. An angry opponent was an opponent who couldn't think clearly. "It might not be able to see you, but it can still smell you."

"Tch," Harry grunted as he climbed to his feet. He was just in time to see the giant creature he'd blinded try to take a bite out of him. Eyes widening in shock, the young man threw himself out of the serpents path, just narrowly avoiding an ignoble death.

This did not mean he was out of danger though, because when the Basilisk crashed into the wall it ended up taking the entire wall out. The chamber shook as several large chunks of brick was thrown in all directions. Harry managed to avoid the worst of it, but still ended up taking several hits from a number of smaller fragments. One particular piece of brick crashed into his left forearm, causing Harry to wince as he

felt the bone crack.

Gritting his teeth, Harry scrambled to his feet and held up the hand holding his wand. Or rather, the hand that had been holding his wand. It wasn't there anymore. Which means he must have lost it when he'd taken his impromptu tumble to the ground. The situation was made ten times worse because the Basilisk had recovered from crushing a wall and was now attacking him again.

Harry ran quickly, heading to his left just as the giant serpent lunged at him. He managed to dodge its jaws, but unfortunately the beast moved faster than he had anticipated and ended up getting smacked by the thing's tail. The unexpected lashing ended up with Harry smacking into one of the many pillars, blood and spittle flying out of his mouth as the air was knocked from his lungs and his ribs were rattled something fierce.

Barely managing to withhold a wince, Harry stood back to his feet, a hand on his chest. He couldn't tell exactly how much damage had been done to him, but he'd definitely cracked at least one or two of his ribs, maybe more. He could feel something sharp and painful poking his organs, like someone was stabbing his lungs with a knife. He really hoped that didn't mean his lungs had been punctured. That would seriously hamper his ability to fight, and probably kill him.

Which was not good, because the Basilisk was coming his way again.

Knowing that he had to move if he didn't want to become this creature's next meal, Harry tried to run, to move out of the serpent's way. Yet the moment he made an attempt to move pain flared up in his chest, sending him to the ground coughing as blood began dribbling from his mouth. Yeah, his lungs had definitely been punctured.

The Basilisk reared its head back, preparing to attack. Harry grit his bloodstained teeth as his intelligent mind raced to come up with something, anything that would get him out of his situation. Things couldn't end like this. If nothing else, he wanted to kill Riddle for what the man had done to Hermione.

Just as he was beginning to lose hope, a large ball of flame burst into existence right in front of him. Harry was forced to cover his eyes as the

fire, a powerful white flame, flared so brightly that it burned his retina. The sound of singing filled the air. Harry didn't know what was singing, but he could not deny it was a beautiful sound. However, all good things must come to an end and so to did the singing. Seconds later there was a loud explosion, followed by a hiss of anger from the basilisk, and then a clang as something that sounded decidedly metallic in nature crashed to the floor. When the flare died down, Harry opened his eyes, blinking the spots out of them. He then saw the basilisk shaking back and forth, a large scorch mark on its face, and just several feet in front of Harry himself was an object.

A sword to be precise. A beautifully crafted sword that shone and glinted in the low lighting with a surface that was polished to perfection. The hilt was inset with rubies and there were several motifs that Harry recognized as belonging to house Gryffindor. Engraved into the blades length just beneath the hilt was a name: Godric Gryffindor.

Not really caring that this was quite possibly one of the greatest treasures of all time, Harry dashed towards the blade, scooping it up and wrapping his hand tightly around the hilt. He had very little magic left, he was tired, and hurt. All he wanted to do now was slay this thing and then kill Riddle. If could do that he would be satisfied.

Lifting the sword into the air, Harry directed what little magic he had left into holding the blade aloft. Directing and channeling his power into the blade, he took aim at the giant serpent. The monster was just now regaining its baring. Whatever that fire that had struck it was, it had clearly hurt the creature.

Good.

With his eyes narrowing in concentration, Harry aimed at the basilisk's open mouth. He would only have one shot at this, so he would have to make it count. He waited until the King of Serpents had fully turned its head to him and began rushing forward, it's jaws open to clamp down on his flesh and devour him. Tom Riddle saw what he was doing and quickly tried to warn the basilisk to little to late.

"NO!"

At the last possible moment, Harry let loose with a burst of his magic and launched the sword straight at the basilisk. The blade flew into the beast's mouth, striking the tender flesh on the roof of the monster oral cavity. The basilisk shrieked a terrible sounding death knell. It writhed and shook, smashing pillars and walls as Godric's sword penetrated the pink flesh of its mouth and made its way into the monster's brain. Harry was forced to run out of the way as several large chunks of debris threatened to crush him. When the dust settled and no more chunks of stone fell, Harry was able to see the basilisk lying on the floor, covered by rubble, unmoving. It was clearly dead.

"Crucio!"

Harry didn't know what happened. One moment he was standing there, panting in exhaustion as he stared at the creature he'd slain. The next he was suffering from indescribable pain as every muscle fiber in his body underwent the most excruciating agony he'd ever experienced. It felt like someone had taken each strand of fiber from his muscles and then proceeded to dip them all in acid. Fire coursed through his veins, invading his mind like a thousand burning hot needles. It was unbearable!

With a jerk, Harry body fell backwards, his head hitting the ground with a loud crack and leaving a bloodstain on the stone floor. Yet the pain didn't even register. His body was already suffering so much that something as little as a concussion inducing head bash was next to nothing for him. Instead he lay there, writhing in agony, a scream tearing from his lips as he was forced to endure what felt like ten-thousand years of pain in a single second.

It felt like forever, but his suffering eventually came to an end. Even then, his body would twitch and spasm as phantom jolts of pain raced through his nervous system. It was only after several seconds of blinking his unfocused, glazed over eyes that Harry finally came to. When he did regain a modicum of conscious thought and vision, it was to see Tom Riddle standing over him.

He looked murderous. The man's face was a rictus of anger and hatred. He was also breathing quite heavily and had sweat beading down his forehead, as if he were straining to retain some of his sanity and self-

restraint. It didn't look like it was working too well.

Harry noticed that there was a wand in his hand. He belatedly recognized it as Ginny's wand, having seen it twice before throughout the year. How was Riddle using it though? Didn't the wand choose the wizard?

Olivander had said that. So then how...unless. Yes, that might be why. Hadn't he said something about Ginny's magic allowing him to manifest a physical form? Something like that. If the magic that made his body was Ginny's, then it would only make sense that he could use her wand.

Of course, if he was able to use her wand it also meant Riddle had regained enough of his physical form to interact with the world. That could not be a good thing, especially as he was now staring down at Harry and pointing a wand at him.

"That was very well played," Riddle's voice was composed, but also very tight. He clearly was not happy that Harry had killed off his pet snake. "You're much more skilled than even I had imagined. It seems that I have underestimated you."

In many of the novels he'd read and movies he watched, this would have been the part where Harry came up with a snappy come back. Maybe he would say something along the lines of how he got that a lot, or perhaps it would be about how villains are always overconfident and underestimating him. Were this a movie, Harry also would have done something by now and defeated this man with some secret weapon he had been saving for just that moment.

This wasn't a movie. Harry did none of those things. Even if he was inclined to do so, he was far too tired.

That didn't mean he did nothing. There was one last trick he had up his sleeve.

With what little magic Harry had left, he summoned two items to his hands. The first was the sword, which was covered in slime and some kind of black, viscous liquid that burned his hands to touch. He ignored the pain. It was unimportant. The second object he summoned was more important than the feeling of his hands being burned by the acidic nature of the basilisk's venom: it was Tom Riddle's diary.

Riddle's eyes widened when he saw what Harry had in his hand. "No! Don't!"

Without preamble, Harry stabbed the sword into the diary. A loud, painful, shriek emitted from it. It was ear-splitting. Being so close to the cause of the noise, Harry's ears began to bleed as his eardrums burst from the impossibly loud sound. At the same time, Tom Riddle's body became riddled with cracks. Light began leaking from the cracks, as if the magic that had been used to build his body was being converted into light particles. The man made from a memory grabbed at his face, clawing as he writhed about. His torso soon bent back as he let loose with a scream that sounded absolutely inhuman.

And then he exploded. All that compressed energy blew outward in a powerful shockwave that would have knocked Harry on his back had he not been laying down. That didn't mean the energy did nothing as it passed over him. There was so much magic compressed into that shockwave that all of the air had been superheated. Harry could actually feel his skin sizzling as the furnace-hot winds passed over him.

It was only many minutes after the magically saturated shockwave had flashed over him that Harry found himself able to move again. He slowly stood to his feet, casting a glance about the room. The place was a complete wreck. Pillars had been destroyed, parts of the ceiling had collapsed, and there were large chunks of debris from the size of a pebble to that of a boulder lying strewn about the floor. It looked like a level five hurricane had plowed through there.

The area around Ginny remained mostly untouched. A few pebbles had fallen on the girl, and she was covered in dust from when the ceiling had been falling down. But she didn't appear injured. Harry wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not.

Slowly, he walked up to the girl. She was still out of it, but a quick hand on her neck revealed that she now had a steady pulse. The paleness of her skin was likely just because she didn't have much magic left due to Riddle stealing most of it.

As he stood there, Harry's mind began to finally comprehend his position.

Riddle was dead, the basilisk had been slain, Ginny was safe, but none of that managed to bring him any form of satisfaction. A part of him almost wished Ginny was dead. The basilisk meant next to nothing to him. And Riddle's death wouldn't bring Hermione back. Nothing would.

Maybe that was why all he felt in that moment was emptiness.

XoX

There were very few circumstances that ever angered Albus Dumbledore. Not since the great war in which he fought against his best friend and secret lover, Gellert Grindelwald had he truly gotten legitimately angry. His patience, congeniality, and ability to make the best out of any situation kept his attitude positive near constantly.

Such was not the case right now.

"I am sorry, but I seem to be losing my hearing in my old age," Albus' voice was dry and flat as he spoke. It was a remarkable difference from the normally amiable tone he often used. "Could you repeat that?"

"L-Look Dumbledore, it's nothing personal," Minister Fudge said, sounding nervous. And indeed the small, round man was very nervous. If the way he was fiddling with his bowler hat didn't tell the headmaster that, then the way his eyes kept shifting as he tried not to look at Dumbledore did. "One girl has already died and another has been taken down the Chamber of Secrets. The Ministry has to be seen doing something. Surely you can understand the need to keep people calm."

"What I cannot understand, Minister, is how you think removing me will calm the populace," Albus stated in what could almost be considered a calm manner. Almost because there was a gleam in his eyes that spoke of possible danger. Never let it be said that Albus Dumbledore did not take his job of protecting the students under his care very seriously. "And as I recall, it was, in fact, your idea to remove the aurors from the school, thus allowing whoever was responsible to kill one of *my* students and take another captive."

Minister Fudge's face turned red. "Now see here, Dumbledore! You know as well as I do that the choice to remove them was because no danger

had presented itself! I couldn't reasonably keep them here when there didn't seem to be any danger!"

"Ah, so we are using hind sight in this argument, are we?" Dumbledore's reply, while not scathing, was more than just a little insulting. This meeting was keeping him from trying to find the chamber and save young Ms. Weasley. It may even already be too late. "It is said that hindsight is always 20-20, however, I believe it has also been said that it is better to be safe than sorry. When there is a potential killer on the loose, I like to go with the safe option. Don't you?"

While Minister Fudge looked like he was trying to Avada Kadavra Albus with his eyes, one of the headmaster's least favorite people stepped in. Lucius Malfoy took a calm step forward, until he was standing alongside Fudge. He looked down at the headmaster from where he sat. Albus could practically feel the smugness oozing off the man. "While it is true that some faults may have been made in the decision to withdraw the aurors, it is equally true that you did not manage to find the killer. You are the headmaster of this school, and therefore responsible for the students and their well-being. That you have not done your job of protecting them shows a lack of care on your part. I do not think you would disagree."

If he were not the experienced and consummate politician that he was, Albus would have glared at Lucius Malfoy, who looked like Christmas had come early. What made the situation even worse was that there really was nothing that could be said to dispute the man's words. Even now, Albus was in a constant state of self-recriminations. There were so many things he could have done better about this situation, actions that could have been taken to resolve the problem quicker. That the words actually rang true just rankled him all the more.

Ever since last night the situation had been tense. The Weasley's had arrived several hours ago and caused quite a bit of ruckus, especially their matriarch. Molly Weasley had been practically shouting about how she wanted her daughter back. Understandable. Their daughter had been taken. Albus could certainly empathize with them. However, after he'd managed to calm them down and direct them to one of the many guest rooms where they could stay until something in the situation changed, these two had come in and began causing even more

problems.

"Lucius makes a good point, Dumbledore," Minister Fudge was quick to latch onto the words of his staunchest supporter, regardless of whether or not the man's reputation had taken a hit. Albus had to wonder what Fudge was thinking, letting Lucius still have the reigns after that disastrous confrontation at the New Year Gala. The head of the Noble House of Malfoy might still be filthy rich, but at least five percent of his supporters had deserted him after his son's rather blatant and poor choice of words at the gala.

And while some might think a five percent loss of support was better than Harry's ten percent, such was not actually the case. Lucius had actually lost more supporters than Harry because, frankly speaking, he had more supporters to begin with.

Thanks to Harry being new to the game of politics, he only had a few people supporting him. Lucius had nearly twice the amount that Harry did, and when broken down into numbers, it became clear that the Malfoy head had lost more supporters than the young Hogwarts student had. Albus actually had a good chuckle over that. It must have really ranked on Lucius' nerves to have technically lost to a twelve year old, even though he'd won the game of words.

Albus Dumbledore prepared to respond to Lucius words, but before he could so much as get a word in edge-wise his wards flared, signifying the approach of someone, and they were coming in hot.

The door soon burst open without the person on the other end even knocking. With much haste, Madam Pomfrey rushed into the room and over to the headmaster's desk, completely ignore both Fudge and Lucius. While the portly Minister bristled, Lucius sent the school healer a very harsh glare.

From the moment he felt the school medi-witch rush past his wards, Albus knew something was afoot. Seeing the near hysterical look on Madam Pomfrey's face merely confirmed the fact that something momentous had indeed happened. Whether that something was good or bad would likely be determined in the next second.

"Ginny Weasley is back!"

What?

"I'm sorry, could you repeat that?" asked Albus, not quite sure he had heard right.

Madam Pomfrey took several calming breaths before beginning again. "It's Ginerva Weasley, headmaster. She's back. We don't know what happened," she added upon seeing the equal expressions of shock on the faces of all three people present, "Ms. Weasley is still asleep and seems to be suffering an almost fatal case of magical exhaustion, but she appeared in the hospital wing while I was administering Mr. and Mrs. Weasley a calming draught and dreamless sleep potion."

Hope began to rise in Albus' heart once again. He didn't know what was going on, nor how Ginny managed to escape from the Chamber of Secrets, but this could only be good news. Maybe now he could find out what was going on.

Standing up, the ancient headmaster looked at Fudge and Lucius, and offered them both a genial smile that was not returned. "I apologize, Minister Fudge, Lord Malfoy, but it appears that one of my students has returned from grave danger and I must see to her. She will no doubt be very frantic when she wakes up in the hospital."

"Now just hold on one second, Dumbledore," Minister Fudge started, "We're not finished here. There is still much to discuss."

"My apologies," Albus continued smiling, only now it was somewhat condescending, "But unless you have a signed ruling from the board of governors implicitly stating that I am to relinquish my title as headmaster, then there really isn't anything to discuss."

Before either Fudge or Lucius could make a proper retort, the wards flared again and Professor McGonagall rushed through the open door. The woman looked positively frazzled. Her eyes were wide and frantic with disbelief and maybe even shock. She was also breathing heavily, showing that she had likely run here from where ever she had been previously.

No one was able to say anything before Minerva spoke up, saying five words that would be the cause the wizarding world no small degree of shock in the year to come.

"Harry Potter has gone missing!"

Looks like I've dropped another doozy on you guys. There will be one more chapter for book 2 after this. I hope you're all looking forward to it. The Q&A for chapter 21 has also been posted on my blog. The link to it is on my website.

Sorrowful Goodbyes

Chapter 23: Sorrowful Goodbyes

As Daphne's eyes slowly opened, the first thing she saw was the top of the canopy that covered her bed. Turning her head to the left, and then to the right revealed green curtains, which blocked out the outside world. While she observed her surroundings, the young girl's higher brain functions began to turn on, and she was able to realize something about her situation.

The soft bed underneath her was warm and comforting, yet she could not take any solace in it. No noise penetrated her curtains, which were charmed for privacy, making her feel alone. Not to mention she was tired. Actually it was more like exhausted, both physically and emotionally. Drained. That was the word she was looking for. She felt drained. Like all of the energy she once had was just gone, evaporated, along with whatever emotions she might have once possessed.

The events of last night played heavily in her mind. They were like a plague, haunting her, taunting her, telling her that she was powerless, that no matter what she did or how strong she became, nothing would change. She felt helpless, incapable, invalid, like nothing she did mattered because she couldn't do anything to make a difference.

This feeling of helplessness, it had all started with Professor Snape's announcement that Hermione Granger had been killed. The response given by Slytherin House had been mixed. Most didn't really care. To them, Hermione was just some muggleborn student who happened to be friends with Harry Potter. But there were a few who seemed to feel genuine regret at the loss of life. Of course, there were also those who had been overjoyed at news of Hermione's untimely demise. Draco Malfoy had been the most vocal of this group.

He was now sporting a broken nose via Blaise's fist.

After the announcement Daphne had been in a state of shock. At least

she thought it was shock. Her mind had been locked in a sort of hazy state. Nothing had seemed real at that point. It all felt like some horrible dream, a nightmare that the blond-haired, blue-eyed Hogwarts student wanted to wake up from as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, this was no dream. Hermione was dead. Professor Snape had confirmed it himself.

Getting out of bed, Daphne decided to go about her morning ritual before the others woke up. She took a shower, got dressed, and then found herself sitting down before a mirror, using an enchanted comb to get the tangles and knots out of her hair. It was an easy process, one that she had done thousands of times and didn't require her to think.

Black rims sat under her eyes, reflected by back the mirrors surface. She hadn't got much sleep last night. Maybe two or three hours at the most.

While combing her hair, Daphne's ice blue eyes moved to glance at one specific bed, the one that contained the reason she hadn't gotten much sleep last night.

Tracey Davis lay in bed, curled up into a ball, looking like a mess. The sheets were a tangled mass of twisted fabric, denoting to a restless sleep. From where she sat, the young blond could easily see the red rims of Tracey's eyelids, and even though the lights were dim, pick out the tear tracks on her face.

The death of Hermione had been much worse for Tracey than it had for her. Daphne had liked the muggleborn girl, but she was not friends with her to the extent that Tracey was. Those two, along with Lisa Turpin, had been very close.

Last night had been singularly awful for Tracey. The brunette with the normally upbeat and cheerful personality had practically collapsed into Daphne's arms the moment the shock of hearing about her friends death had worn off. For most of the night, she had cried into Daphne's shoulder, soaking her clothes in tears and howling out her sorrow. Even Pansy Parkins, someone who despised muggleborns with a passion and would have probably been more than happy to make snide remarks about Hermione's death, had not said a single word to the two of them.

A frown crossed Daphne's face. All throughout last night, while her first friend had bawled her eyes out, Daphne had not shed a single tear. It made her feel guilty. Here she was, one of her friends had died, been killed, and she couldn't even cry for them. Had she really grown so cold that she could no longer shed even a single tear for a friend?

Maybe her father's conditioning ran deeper than she had originally suspected.

She knew there was something wrong with her, that she was emotionally stunted in some way. She couldn't feel emotions as clearly or powerfully as others. What emotions she could feel were almost always fleeting, ephemeral. In some ways, it almost felt like the emotions and feelings she had didn't even belong to her, but to someone else.

There were only two people in the entire world that made her feel, truly feel: Astoria and Harry. Astoria, her dear, sweet sister. The girl that she lived for. It was her love for her sister that allowed Daphne to survive her father's harsh conditioning and punishments when she failed to meet his expectations with her sanity intact. And then there was Harry, the boy who had broken through her defenses within a single night. She always felt something when she was with him. She didn't quite know what it was, but she knew that it was strong, and warm, and accepting. Yes. She felt like he accepted her, faults and all. Because in a way, he was just like she was. Stunted. Brittle. Broken. Yet strong.

Daphne really wished he was there right now, with her. She could really use a hug.

After she finished combing her hair, Daphne made her way over to Tracey's bed and sat down next to her friend. The other girl was going to need comfort when she woke up. Tracey was emotional, more so than anyone else she knew, and she had a feeling that the brunette was not quite done crying yet.

While waiting for the girl to wake, Daphne took to gently stroking her hair in the same way she would when she was with Astoria. It wasn't much, but in the present circumstances, it was the best she could do. She could only hope it would help ease her friend's heart.

Tracey must have not been sleeping as heavily as she usually did, because the feeling of fingers running lightly through her hair caused her to stir. Perhaps she had been having a nightmare and wanted to wake up. Or maybe her sorrow at the loss of her friend made it so that getting a good nights sleep was simply impossible. Either way, her eyes slowly fluttered open, blinking, before they fixed on Daphne.

"Daph," Tracey sounded hoarse. She probably had a soar throat from all the crying she'd done. Her eyes were also red, bloodshot red, and puffy.

"Tracey." Daphne paused in her ministrations, then started again. "How are you feeling?"

"Like shit."

Daphne didn't reprimand the girl for her language. That was Hermione's job, and she didn't want to remind her friend since childhood of what she'd just lost.

Tracey Davis looked at her friend with red-rimmed, bloodshot eyes. "It wasn't a dream, was it? Last night? Hermione. She really. She's really..." She couldn't finish the sentence. Her throat appeared to close up. Tears began gathering in her eyes. Tracey grit her teeth, struggling to contain them, but it was no use. After the first few droplets of crystal clear liquid ran down her face, the brunette Slytherin's body was wracked by a powerful sob.

Daphne didn't say anything. What could she possibly say in this situation? Was there anything she could say that would make her friend feel better? That would ease the ache in her heart? No. No there wasn't. And so she said nothing, instead opting to lay down on her side and pull her friend into a hug much like she did when Astoria came into her room after having a nightmare.

The sound of Tracey's cries woke the other girls in the dorm up. Pansy and Millicent both looked their way, but a death glare from Daphne caused them to scuttle off without a word. As her robes became soaked, Daphne tried to soothe her friend as best she could, crooning and rubbing her head. Eventually, the cries did subside, turning into the occasional snuffle.

"I can't believe she's gone," Tracey choked out. Like a lost little girl who'd been flung into a sea of emotions she clung to Daphne as if the blond-haired Slytherin were the only thing keeping her afloat. "One minute she was right next to us, laughing and talking and having fun, and then she was just gone. Why? Why her? How come she was the one to get killed?"

That was indeed a good question. Daphne didn't say it out loud, but she found Hermione's death to be very suspect. There had only been three attacks the entire school year: Missus Norris, Professor Lockhart, and Hermione. Of the three who were attacked, only Hermione was killed. Why? And how? How come she was killed while the other two were merely petrified? And why would she be targeted? She might be an amazing witch, but there were several hundred people in this school, and it wasn't like she was the best student at Hogwarts. Who would want to kill her?

Unless...but no. That just didn't make sense. If they wanted to attack Harry there were better targets than Hermione. While Daphne was not vein or anything of the sort, she felt it would not be out of bounds to say that she would have made a far more valuable target than Hermione Granger if getting Harry Potter was the ultimate goal. But then, she was also a pureblood. Maybe that was why. Or were they even after Harry in the first place? And if so, why not just attack Harry himself?

So many questions. And all of them without answers.

"Come on, Tracey," Daphne said softly, directing her friend out of bed and leading her towards the showers. "Let's get you cleaned up. We'll have to be in the Great Hall soon."

"Yeah... I guess..."

As Daphne began to help her friend wash her, she couldn't help but curse whoever had killed her friend.

XoX

Helping Tracey Davis get ready for the day was a chore. And not in the usual way. Ever since she had known the girl, it was simply a challenge

to get the girl up and going. She was lazy and unmotivated in the mornings. She just didn't want to wake up. It normally took Daphne at least half an hour each morning just to get the girl to the Great Hall.

This was not the problem Daphne found herself facing now. The issue in front of her wasn't due to a desire to sleep more, but an ache, a wound that no spell could heal. How could you heal a wound given to the soul?

The brown-haired girl was listless. She hardly responded to anything Daphne tried to get her to do. Even when Daphne asked her to lift her hands so she could help take her nightgown off, the brunette only made a half-hearted attempt to raise them up, forcing Daphne to raise them for her. The amount of effort she put into helping her get ready was nearly three times more than she had every other day since they started going to Hogwarts.

Still, after everything was said and done, Daphne managed to make do and, in a little over half an hour, Tracey was at least somewhat presentable.

When they went down to the common room, it was to see that Blaise was already awake and waiting for them. He was standing just a little off to the side of the girls dorm, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest. It looked like he'd been standing there for a while.

As they walked closer to the second year male Slytherin, Daphne found out that didn't even need to ask how he was doing to know that her dark-skinned friend was not doing very well. While he masked it much better than Tracey, it was clear that he'd spent a good deal of last night crying. His eyes were slightly red and a little puffy, and there were black bags underneath them, denoting a distinct lack of sleep.

"Blaise."

"Daphne," he greeted, then turned his eyes to the girl that Daphne had wrapped an arm around, "Tracey."

Tracey looked up at her friend, then looked back down at the ground.

"Hey Blaise..."

Upon hearing the monotone greeting, Blaise grimaced and looked back towards Daphne, a silent question in his eyes. When she just shook her head, the Italian boy nodded, understanding the situation without needing to be told. He walked up to them, wrapping an arm around Tracey's shoulder in a protective gesture. The girl in question tensed a bit, but soon relaxed in their embrace. Together, the three of them proceeded to the Great Hall like that.

In most cases, the Great Hall of Hogwarts was a rambunctious place. It was a place where hundreds of students congregated for meals, chatting and laughing, creating a cacophony of noise that was almost relaxing despite the volume hectic nature.

Such was not the case now. The Great Hall was silent. Dead as a grave. No one spoke. People avoided making eye contact with anyone else. This was not the Great Hall that Daphne had come to know.

She and Blaise slowly guided Tracey into the massive room. Almost as soon as they entered, all of the people within the Great Hall turned their heads to stare at them. Those eyes followed them as they walked along the hall, searching for a place to sit. Tracey shrunk into them, hiding herself behind Blaise and Daphne like a timid rabbit, nothing at all like usual.

Daphne tried not to glare at the people looking at her and her friends. She didn't know what she hated more: the attention she was getting, or the fact that the gazes all the people were giving her were pitying. No. What made all this worse was that she couldn't even blame them for their stare. That's what she hated the most.

She and her two friends eventually sat down after finding the others. Neville wasn't down yet, but everyone else was there. Susan and Hannah were sitting together, using each other for support. Both had clearly spent much of their night crying as well. And they looked exhausted. Lisa was sitting in between Luna and Terry. She was using Luna as support, the younger girl with her arm wrapped around the second year's waist. Several hic ups escaped her, letting Daphne know that, much like Tracey, she had probably been crying this morning. Luna looked downtrodden as well. She barely looked up from the table, which

she was staring at with a blank gaze. Terry looked the best out of the trio. He was currently rubbing a hand along Lisa's back.

All of them gave half-hearted greetings as Blaise, Daphne, and Tracey sat down. No one really felt like speaking. After nearly fifteen minutes of this silence, Neville Longbottom walked in. He was being escorted by Professor McGonogall. When he got closer to them, Daphne could see that he'd clearly had just as rough a night as everyone else. He sat down next to Hannah without uttering so much as a word.

Daphne frowned.

"Neville..."

Neville looked up at the sound of her voice. Seeing who was speaking to him he tried to give her a smile, but failed. "Hey, Daphne."

A part of Daphne wanted to ask if he was alright. She didn't because she knew it was a stupid question. None of them were alright.

Instead she asked, "Where's Harry?"

"Harry is..." Neville grimaced. "Missing."

The head of every single one of Harry's friends snapped towards Neville.

"What?" Daphne asked in a soft, disbelieving whisper. She shook her head, her blond locks swaying. "I... I don't know understand. What do you mean he's missing?"

"I mean just that. No one really knows when, but sometime last night, Harry disappeared," Neville answered. "I woke up this morning to find his bed empty and his trunk gone. There was no trace of him in the common room. It was... it was as if he'd never been there."

Daphne felt her mind reeling. Harry was gone? What did that mean? He couldn't just be gone. Not now. Not after what happened. Harry was the glue that kept them together. He was the entire reason they were all friends. With him gone, would their friendship even survive?

And, more importantly, would Daphne survive without him?

"So no one knows where Harry went?" asked Blaise, looking contemplative. "Do we have any clues?"

"No." Neville shook his head. "All I know is that I woke up sometime last night to use the loo, and when I came back I noticed Harry's trunk gone and his bed empty. I went to inform Professor McGonagall, but..."

Daphne frowned as she tried to figure out what was going on here. There was definitely something strange happening. Hermione was gone and Harry was missing. These two facts couldn't be a mere coincidence.

A thought occurred to her. Had he... did he try to go after the person who killed Hermione? But then why was his trunk gone? Perhaps he had... but no. She couldn't jump to conclusions. Daphne would wait to speak with the headmaster. Surely, he would know something.

As if hearing her thoughts, headmaster Dumbledore rose up from his seat, causing the head of everyone present to turn towards him. Daphne did as well, and she was shocked by what she saw. Dumbledore, the man who was hailed as the leader of the light, one of the most powerful wizards in the world, and someone who almost always had a jovial smile on his face, looked utterly beaten. She'd never seen the man look so defeated. His posture was slump, his eyes were dim, even his beard somehow managed to convey a sense of depression. The man looked like someone who had just been crushed under the weight of the entire world. It was, to be perfectly honest, frightening.

"Everyone," despite clearly feeling the events of last night, the headmaster's rang strong and clear throughout the Great Hall. Sonoras charm, no doubt. "This year is one that has been filled with much hardship. What once looked like a bright year in which the four houses would see a form of unity that has not been present since Hogwart's founding, has now been mired in darkness. The Chamber of Secrets was opened, and though we managed to capture the one responsible, it cannot change the heart ache we all suffer. One of our own, a young woman with a bright future ahead of her, had her life cut indefinitely short last night."

At these words, the Great Hall came alive as several hundred sheets of paper appeared, lining the tables. It was only after several seconds that Daphne realized they were not actually sheets of paper, but photos, pictures of Hermione Granger. Each one seemed to depict the young, muggleborn witch doing something: spending time with her friends, practicing a spell, cheering during a Quidditch game, slapping Tracey upside the head for her vulgar language.

The sight of so many pictures of the bushy-haired witch caused those around her to nearly break down in tears. To the blond's left, Tracey let out a sob and buried her face in Daphne's shoulder again, causing the girl to wrap an arm around her friend.

She knew what Dumbledore was trying to do. He was trying to unify the school through their shared hardship, to tell that they needed to come together if they wanted to move past this.

She wished he had gone about it in a better way. Couldn't he see that his actions were hurting her friends?

"Although we have lost a great witch and an even greater person, Hermione Granger still lives within each of us. Those who move onto the next great adventure are only truly dead when they are forgotten by the living. I ask of you to never forget Hermione Granger, what she accomplished here at school, and what she could have accomplished had her life not been cut tragically short." The headmaster paused. "In dark times such as these, we must learn to rely on each other. When things become too tough to face on your own, do not hesitate to lean on your friends, for they will never let you down."

He closed his eyes then, looking tired, as if the speech had worn him down.

"After breakfast, you shall all be escorted to the station in Hogsmeade," Dumbledore continued, opening his eyes again. "When you arrive home, I would ask that you use this time to get some rest and grieve. All wounds heal in time, but you must set aside that time before they can truly heal. And now I must make my leave. There are many issues that I have to deal with. I wish you all the best."

No one said anything as Dumbledore left the Great Hall. Daphne wanted to run after the man, but found herself unable to move. She couldn't leave her friends like this, especially Tracey. Just like she was strong for her sister, Daphne now needed to be strong for her friends.

And yet, as she looked around the room, watching as people finally began speaking in hushed whispers, the young girl who had grown up much too fast could feel her heart wavering.

'Harry, where are you?'

XoX

Ever since last night, when news had reached her and Hannah about Hermione's death, the young redhead had been in a state of shock. A part of her simply couldn't believe that one of her friends was no longer amongst the living, that someone she knew, someone she cared for, was now dead. Another part felt like something had been ripped out of her chest. That night, after the news had been delivered by a sorrowful Professor Sprout, she and Hannah had cried themselves to sleep. Now all she felt was a sense of loss.

Hermione was dead. Harry was missing. No one had said anything about Harry yet. The headmaster had avoided even mentioning her raven-haired friend. She was sure that he had something to do with catching the culprit last night. It was the only reason for him to be missing. But what happened? Where did he go? Had he disappeared? Did he leave? Why would he do that? There were so much about this entire situation that Susan just didn't know. It worried her.

After breakfast in the Great Hall, all of the students were escorted by the aurors down to the Hogsmeade train station. While the killer had been purportedly caught, no one wanted to leave the children alone during such a stressful time, and felt it best if they had authority figures with them to help keep everyone calm.

This wasn't much of a consolation, especially to those who felt the sting of loss biting at them, but it was all the staff of Hogwarts and Ministry could do at the moment.

Among those who were escorted to the Hogwarts Express was Susan Bones. She, along with Blaise, Daphne, Hannah, Lisa, Luna, Tracey, Terry, and Neville, found themselves sitting in a single compartment.

It was a little bit crowded. While there were two less people there, the compartment also wasn't as large as it normally was. Usually, when they sat together, it would have been Harry who performed the spell needed to expand the space around them so they could all sit together. This time it was Daphne, whom Harry had taught the spell upon her asking. Some of the others had learned it to, including Susan, but they didn't have the magic necessary to perform it on something as large as a train compartment.

Unfortunately, while Daphne was probably the most powerful witch among them, the spell was one she had little practice using. This had been her first time expanding a space this big. Thus the compartment had only expanded a little bit, enough to fit her and the others, but not enough to be truly comfortable.

Susan sat in between Hannah and Blaise. Neville was on Hannah's other side, talking to the pig-tailed blond in a quiet voice. She couldn't hear what was being said, but then, she wasn't really listening either.

Over on the other side of the compartment was Daphne, who was sitting on the far left of the compartment near the window. She looked tired, probably due to performing the expansion charm, though Susan also suspected that, much like her and the others, the blond Slytherin had not gotten much sleep last night. The beautiful girl had looked tired when she came to the Great Hall that morning too.

Sitting next to her, Tracey looked to be in even worse shape. Her eyes were red and her cheeks stained with tears. She looked like she might burst out crying at any second. The second year Slytherin was leaning on Lisa—who looked just as bad, both holding each other for support. Next to two of them was Terry, whose eyes showed more emotion than Susan had ever seen in them, and none of them good. He had Luna on his left. Susan couldn't tell what the first year was thinking. It was hard to know Luna's thoughts due to them being so out there. But she imagined, hoped, that their newest friend was also feeling the loss of Hermione.

The compartment was far too quiet for her liking. No one was talking except for Hannah and Neville, and Susan had the feeling they were only talking because neither of them were comfortable with the silence. Their conversation was stilted and full of pauses, as if they were forcing themselves to speak as opposed to letting it flow naturally.

It was while Susan was thinking these thoughts, her mind lost and trying to come to terms with the reality that Hermione was dead, that the door to the compartment slid open.

"What a dead crowd," came a familiar and obnoxious voice. Susan looked at the doorway to see Draco standing there with his two goons, Crabbe and Goyle, along with Nott and Pansy. He was grinning. "You lot look like somebody just died. Oh. Wait." Draco chuckled. "Somebody did die. What a shame. You guys must be awfully sad now that your pet mudblood is gone."

"Piss off Draco!" Tracey snarled in a voice with more hatred than Susan had ever heard from the normally upbeat girl. It was almost startling to hear so much rage in the voice of someone who was usually so bubbly. "I'll hex your fucking bits off if you don't!"

Susan's eyes widened in shock. Tracey had never been one to curb her language, but even she wasn't that vulgar. Not that anyone, least of all Susan, could blame her. Draco's words were hurtful, even more so now. The boy didn't seem to even care that someone was dead. He was actually making light of what happened. As if Hermione's death meant nothing!

"Are you threatening me?" Draco's eyes narrowed.

Tracey stood up, gritting her teeth, her wand in hand as she glared at the blond boy. "I don't make threats!" she hissed. "I'm telling you, make one insult about Hermione and I'll hex you so bad the Malfoy line will end with you!"

"You'd better watch what you say to your betters, you half-blood whore!"

"Fuck you, Malfoy!"

"Why you—"

"Intestinum!"

Draco Malfoy's eyes widened, his face turning into a grimace. He lurched forward, dropping the wand he'd been holding, his hands going to his backside.

Everyone stared at the blond boy in shock. After several seconds had passed they turned their heads to see Daphne staring at Malfoy with a look that was so cold it caused all those who saw it to freeze.

"I've just cast a bowel cleansing charm on you," Daphne said, her voice as frozen as her eyes. "You have ten seconds to make it to a loo before you lose control of your bowels. I suggest you use that time wisely."

"Damn you, Greengrass! Just wait till my father hears about this!"

Malfoy grit his teeth as he stood up and began running out the door, his group of sycophants parting for him as he rushed down the hall, his hands still gripping his butt.

With a flick of her wand, Daphne closed the door. Another flick cast a locking charm. It was a very basic charm. An Alohamora would break it, but Daphne didn't think Draco or his ilk would know how to cast it. They should be safe.

Daphne soon sat back down, pocketing her wand, and went back to staring out the window. Susan and Hannah shared a look, before they, too, went back to what they were doing.

The rest of the trip was made in uncomfortable silence.

XoX

The Hogwarts Express pulled into Platform nine and three-quarters. As the wheels ground to a stop, all of the students began grabbing their bags. Luggage was pulled from the overhead compartments, trash and wrappers were thrown away. Soon enough, the students were walking out of the doors and then off the train, where they were greeted by family.

Susan and the others all went outside together. They stuck around as a group, pulling on each other for what support they could and trying to ignore the pitiable stares sent their way. Everyone knew that Hermione had been a part of their group, thus, every Hogwarts student they passed looked at them with pity and sorrow-filled eyes. Some could ignore the expressions sent their way, others had a more difficult time of it.

"Daphne."

Standing within the group beside Tracey and Blaise, Daphne stiffened at the sound of her father's voice. Susan could see why. Nathaniel Greengrass was a frightening man. Once a person known for his generosity and cunning, a conundrum if she'd ever heard one, the head of House Greengrass had become cold and unfeeling, focusing only on his political career and nothing else. It was like all the man knew was work. Her aunty once told her that it was his way of coping with the loss of his wife, but Susan hadn't paid much attention to the explanation at the time.

"I'll see you lot later," Daphne said quietly, her eyes dim. She looked lost, scared even. Susan wondered if the reason for her fright was because Harry wasn't with them.

"Yeah, bye Daph." Tracey gave her friend a hug, taking more time than was normal to let go. When she did, the brunette gave her friend a teary smile. "Try to keep in touch, okay. Summer's going to be hard without you."

Daphne's smile was more of a grimace. "I'll see what I can do."

The next to leave was Tracey.

"Tracey!" Her mother called. The moment Tracey saw her mom, the brunette rushed into her mom's open arms, crying. In return, Misses Davis wrapped her arms tightly around her daughter. "I heard about what happened. It was all in the Daily Prophet. I am so, so sorry Tracey. I know how close you and Hermione were."

Tracey's response to her mother's words was to cry that much harder. Susan and the others watched as Misses and Mister Davis gave them an

apologetic smile as they left with their crying daughter in tow.

Blaise followed soon after, picked up by a strangely somber Celestina Zabini. Then Neville, followed lastly by Lisa. Susan and Hannah were picked up last.

"Aunty!" Susan ran into her aunt's arms, resisting her own tears. She knew she would be crying more later that night, but she didn't want others to see her tears. Not after everything that had happened.

"Susan," her aunty's voice was much softer than usual. Sorrowful. "I heard what happened. I am so sorry. If only we had let the aurors stay at Hogwarts. Maybe then..." she trailed off as Susan shook her head and buried her face deeper into Amelia's chest.

"D-don't say that. No one could have known this would happen. Not you, not anyone." Susan looked into her aunt's eyes. "Aunty. Harry's also—"

"Missing. I know." Amelia frowned. "I got a call from Dumbledore telling me. We think he might have run away."

"Run away?" Susan was shocked. "Why?"

"Sometimes, when a person feels lost or is unable to cope, they run. They try to escape what happened by running, feeling that if they run far enough, fast enough, they can escape the reality of their situation. Dumbledore and I think Harry might have run away because he can't deal with the knowledge that Hermione is, well, not with us anymore."

Susan was glad her aunty hadn't said Hermione was dead. Even if it was true. She didn't think she could deal with someone actually commenting on her friend's death.

"I'm scared."

"I know, Susan, but try not to worry. Dumbledore told me he would head over to Harry's relatives and see if he's checked in. We're hoping he might have shown up there. And with luck, he might still even be there."

Susan hoped her aunty was right. But still, she couldn't shake this

dreadful feeling that something awful was about to happen, or already had happened. She didn't know what it was, but she prayed that it had nothing to do with Harry.

XoX

School was official out for the summer, thank god. Dudley didn't know how much more he would have been able to stand staying around at school. Nine months? Way too long for him. Especially since all his teachers did was complain. You're not doing enough work, Dudley, or can't you try a little harder, Dudley. Why couldn't his teachers see that he didn't care about their stupid lessons? He was only there so he could wrestle.

Too bad the school was making things difficult for him. Bunch of no good idiots.

He had arrived back home from Smeltings earlier yesterday, where he'd been greeted by his parents with a large dinner and several presents. The presents had been nice, but the dinner could have been better. That was the one thing Dudley could appreciate about his cousin. Harry might be a frightening, freakish boy with strange powers, but he could cook some really good food.

Dudley stared at the tele as he and his family watched a TV show. He wasn't really sure what the show was called, as it was something his parents had picked to watch, but so long as he was getting to watch something he didn't particularly care.

Though a part of him would rather be playing video games right now. Video games were cool. Except when he couldn't beat him. Then they just pissed him off. Not that it mattered anyway. He didn't have a game system anymore since he broke his last one, and his mom and dad told him that he would need to wait before they had enough money to buy him a new system.

He was pretty sure they were just being cheap.

The ringing of the doorbell caused Dudley to twitch. Sitting on the couch, his dad and mom looked from the TV to each other. After silently

communing, they then turned their heads towards him.

"Dudley, go answer the door."

"But I don't wanna! You answer the door!"

"Duddikins, listen to your father and answer the door, please."

"Don't wanna! Don't wanna, don't wanna, don't wanna!"

"Dudley, if you don't answer the door, the good delivery man can't get in. I bought pizza."

And that was all it took before Dudley decided that he was going to be the first to answer the door. Pizza? Yes please!

Waddling over to the door like some kind of really fat penguin, Dudley undid the locks and opened the door... only to find himself staring down the tip of a wand.

"Obliviate."

The last thing Dudley saw before his world went black was a pair of glowing green eyes.

Here it is, the end of book 2. And its a cliffhanger. I know, you hate me. I do apologize for the cliff hanger, but this entire ending just had that feel to it. And I wanted to set up the third book.

The Q&A for chapter 22 should be up on my blog tomorrow if any of you are interested in reading my answers to your reviews.

When I plan on uploading my next HP fic

Harry Potter and the Path of Healing

A lot of people have been asking me when I plan on starting the next book in my Harry Potter series. I have received no less than 1,543 PMs asking me when I plan on updating or why I haven't updated this story.

Which brings me to this announcement. While I appreciate that you guys enjoy my story, I'm not keen on having my inbox filled with the same message over and over again. Therefore, I am announcing right now that I will start writing the third Harry Potter book in December of this year. My goal is to have the first chapter ready and updated on Christmas as a sort of gift to you, something that you can read after enjoying time with your family. I will not start before then, however, because I still have 7 stories in my profile that also need to be updated. One of them is only 8 or so chapters away from completion, and I want to finish it before I start on my HP series again.

Please understand, while I love the fact that you all like reading my fanfics, I don't want my inbox being inundated with message of "when are you planning to update you HP fic?" or "why haven't you started the next HP story?" I have several people who contact me through the PM system who ask for my help with their own writing, and it makes it very difficult for me to find their message when I have to go through, literally, a thousand other messages.

Chapter 25

Author's alert: The first chapter of my next Harry Potter story, Harry Potter and the Ties that Bind, has been posted. Just go to my profile and you'll see it.